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Summary: The Loser's Club had driven It from the personal gaming reserve It had made. Now, it was time for It to make a new one. Just as It had to create a new physical form after Its other was destroyed by those hated ones. And It wants no more to feel. No new emotions. No surprises. Just hunger. Hunger and hatred.(Set after Chapter 2. M for violence, gore and other triggers.)

1. Prologue

Prologue

"He had an idea that even when beaten he could steal a little victory by laughing at defeat."

— John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

The odor under the bridge was bitter. A sickly combination of dirt, alcohol and urine. Clothes from the local homeless scattered along the ground as well as the lingering scent of a bonfire. Some rats can be heard, squeaking as they scurry away at the sight of the three boys; Derek, Stuart and James come tracking through the muddy underbelly of Derry, flashlights in hand. Their sneakers squishing in the mud. The three are hoping to find the last remnants of what had occurred fifty-four years earlier; some nut job in a clown outfit had murdered countless children.

"Through there," Stuart, a diminutive boy with spectacles who probably weighed seventy pounds soaking wet, points. "He saw it in there."

Derek, leading the way warns. "This better be good."

"Oh it is. I know it's in there. Frankie told me. Right in there." Stuart points, as James gives him a shove as he makes his way past.

"You asshole."

"Yeah, well I'll rip ya' a new one if ya' brought us out here for nothin'." James hisses as he splashes in a puddle of unidentified liquid. "Ugh, fuck this better not be piss!" he shakes his foot. "Come on, man."

He continues down the darker end of the bridge, the chains of his leather jacket jingling. "Ya' know, they thought it was that Bowers guy who had done the killings, 'til they found out it was the clown nut. They never found all the kids' bodies, so maybe we'll find some skeletons down here."

Derek's light illuminates one area in particular, scattering a small mob of rodents. "Alright. where--"

Stuart begins to look around, adjusting his glasses, quickly walking ahead of the other two. "Should be here...the graffiti..."

He stops when he sees something. A bit of movement, far too big to be a rat, or any other animal. Maybe one of the bums who lives here. "What..." he mutters under his breath, as his ears catch the sound of tiny bells as whatever it is continues to lurk in the shadows. His heartbeat is speeding up, thumping against his rib cage as a tightness takes hostage of his chest. Aiming his flashlight, it's shaky beam only catching a blurred flash of gray, or white? He couldn't tell. Whatever it was, it was *tall*.

"What it is?" James calls after him. "We ain't got all day, you little shit." He gives Derek a knowing tap on his arm as Stuart turns to face them, the flashlight's yellow stream pointed under his chin flooding across the growing panic on his features.

"There's something in h--"

An impossibly large black claw-like hand jerks him back into the darkness, curling around his face. His flashlight flying to the ground as his screams echo throughout the concrete chamber.

"Fuck me!" James accidentally knocks into Derek as he turns to run. "Let's get the fuck outta here!"

Just then, he's thrown back by an invisible force, his head cracking against the side of the concrete tunnel. "Aw fuck...!" He places his hand to his temple, everything is spinning as the warmth of fresh blood courses down his forehead.

"What the...fuck." He looks up to see a fuzzy image of Derek, being held up by the nape of his neck, the culprit is too dark to see, but his eyes are two burning spheres of golden-yellow.

"Shit..."

The figure, still clutching Derek by the neck bends down. "Didn't your Mommy teach you not to use that type of language? It's rude," The

being's voice then changed to a female one-one that made James' body tense, his fingernails dig into the soil.

"James, sweetie, didn't I tell you gentlemen don't use that kind of talk? You don't want me to wash your mouth out with soap now?" It steps closer, the voice becoming more shrill and monstrous. "Or beat you with my belt!"

A throaty evil laugh ripples throughout the area. The being closes in and James now gets his first glimpse of their attacker; a clown, towering, a shock of flaming orange hair, white face with crimson stripes spiking through its eyes and a devilish grin displaying a row of razor-sharp incisors dripping with red and torn strips of skin.

The creature then digs its teeth into Derek's jugular, tearing away the flesh, blood streaks splatter across James' face.

He jumps to his feet, his lungs managing to force a scream out. Still dizzy from his injury, the pain ripping through his skull, he attempts to run the other way. His path however, is blocked. There stood a full skeleton dripping with bile and blood. Its pupils mimicking that same golden-yellow. It spoke.

"What's wrong?" It says in a crackling voice, deep and baleful. "Ya' know, I think your skull is fractured Jimmy-boy," It takes a few wobbly steps. "You wanted to see a skeleton, didn't you? Have a look!" It leaps with its maw open and James screams, thrusting his arms across his face as he tumbles to the ground. The sounds of his wails are abruptly cut off.

On the lower half of the wall, near a pair of blood-stained spectacles is graffiti written in vibrant red paint : PENNYWISE LIVES.

2. Chapter 1

Chapter 1

"When a devil falls in love, it's the most hauntingly beautiful thing ever. And you should be terrified, for he will go to the depths of Hell for her."—
Unknown

'The night we met I knew I needed you so, and if I had the chance I'd never let you go, so won't you say you love me, I'll make you so proud of me, we'll make 'em turn their heads every place we go, so won't you, please, be-be m-m-my, b-b-be m-m-m-y b-b-aby.'

Mirasal reaches over and slams her polished silver prosthetic fist on the antique radio, causing the song to resume. Her azure eyes still pointedly on her work, a bundle of multi-colored wires in her flesh hand. The red, green and blue intertwined with each other into a coil. They were part of an unknown gadget she'd found in an abandoned ship. It had started working, albeit briefly, before dying out again. It was most likely from the human world, like most the items she found. Given the shoddy design it must have been from quite a few decades ago.

She glances up, fidgeting in her chair, looking out of the large circular window at the three suns, one large one encompassed by two smaller ones starting to gradually descend towards the horizon, painting the sky a faded blue-pink color. A light breeze made its way in where she'd opened the window pane just a crack, the sweet mountain air seeping in, the semi-transparent rose-colored curtains blowing faintly. The sound of the nearby river roaring below can be heard. The sunlight in the room was diminishing quickly, so she flicked the switch of the lamp that sits on the polished wooden desk, giving the area a soft glow, reflecting the red triangular pattern of her hat that rested on the back of her head.

Overlooking a magnificent landscape, the Hotel Terog was located near its namesake river. Built into a large mountain near a picturesque grotto, the Terog had a colorful appearance; light blue exterior, trimmed with a pale pink and gold. The pillars and columns were all molded to mimic the shape of bones with rows of multi-

colored tiles along the outer walls. Multiple statues of Arak and Rykan religious figures adorned the buildings edges, their fearsome expressions seemed to be glaring down at anyone who enters. Almost as if warning any outsiders to be respectful of their surroundings. It was much larger inside than it appeared on the out, the pathway leading up to the entrance was steep and rocky, surrounded by trees rocks and shrubs. The interior was decorated with the artwork of famed Thycenian artists that adorned the walls,crimson red carpets and shiny swirl-patterned floors polished to perfection. In recent years it had become something of a tourist destination. Hundreds of humans flocked through every year, so many her grandfather had now mostly avoided the place while her grandmother handled the management.

They had built it as a haven for artists to seek inspiration peace and tranquility. It had been their pride, a source of accomplishment, but they never intended for it to become any kind of attraction for visiting outworlders. But now it seems there was no stopping the draw that it held for people looking to enjoy the spectacular Tarrosian landscape. Mirasal could hardly blame them since it offers, in her opinion, one of the best views of Tarros' famed blue sunsets. Of course, she could be biased in that regard.

"She didn't say much...just that she wanted to be alone." Tomah informs Kikara as she stands outside Mirasal's door, arms across chest, listening to the muffled sound of the music on the other side. "So, you think it's just one of her moods?" she says as she turns to him, the tip of her sandal drumming on the ground.

"Yes. It looks like one of her moods," he states dryly. "I mean, she didn't say anything other than that." he shrugs as his thin scraggly fingers adjust a small centerpiece on a stand near the window. Kikara gives a small nod, flipping her mane of thick light brown locks over her shoulders as she picks up a gold metal object sitting on the table, knocking lightly as she opens the room's door. "Buna diwas."

"Buna." Mirasal replies, not looking back as Kikara stood in front of the silver-framed mirror hanging on the creamy peach wall. The light on the other side of the room altering the bright orange of her dress to something more muted.

Mirasal enjoyed Kikara's company. Mainly because she's more content to just listen. And Kikara is more than happy to do all the talking. Usually about the goings-on at the hotel involving the guests; who she thinks is sleeping with who, who's got a lover, who is acting a bit shady and may be on the run from something. Those guests that sneak out to the hotel's bar after their spouse has long gone to sleep.

"I see you have that Eartho music playing again. Why do you listen to that?" Kikara asks as she preens herself, looking at her reflection.

"Because I like it. I enjoy it. It's soothing in a way." Mirasal pulls her eyes away from her preoccupation long enough to glance over at her friend. Earth music hadn't gained much popularity here but she loved listening to it. It was different. More lively than the music from her own culture.

Clearly someone disagrees.

"Really? All of it just sounds like noise to me. All that yelling. Unpleasant," Kikara looks over at her, tearing herself away from her grooming. She then wanders over to the bed, the padding of the carpet silencing her steps. She plops down on the end of the mattress, right near Mirasal's chair, the comforter a near-match for her frock. "That song sounds alright, I suppose." She still didn't get the draw.

The women sit in silence as the melodic sound of the music replaces their voices, before Kikara speaks up, tapping the heel of her foot against the ground, blowing a curl out of her line of vision.

"You've been in here for a while."

"I needed a little break." Mirasal murmurs, her voice flat, gaze still on her project.

Kikara's foot halts its tapping as she takes in a slow inhale.

"Um, a guest mentioned your...*attitude*. Not entirely sure what that means. She just said you had one," Mirasal loudly exhales as Kikara continued. "I know you probably didn't mean to offend her," she looks away, mouth tugged up in a half-sneer. "The old bruga can't be satisfied, it seems. Probably why her mate has been sneaking off at

night."

Mirasal squeezes her eyelids shut, shaking her head, her fingers tightening around the wires in her grasp. "She was yelling, I didn't know how to respond." The woman's shrill voice had felt like it was piercing through her eardrums. She shudders, her lips pursing tightly together. She needed a few minutes to herself to unwind from the experience. She may be occasionally, unintentionally tactless in her behavior, but she never got in someone's face and shouted.

Certainly not over something as trivial as a pair of slippers.

"I know, but maybe try not to...I mean she just thought you were-" Kikara adds, stretching her arm around to give the lower part of her spine a small scratch. "A little rude. And again I know you don't mean to be. It's just we all must make an effort. No matter how... unpleasant."

"I tried. I said she was yelling and I got overwhelmed." Mirasal gives another heavy sigh. People often misconstrued her behavior. She can at times come off as indifferent, but it was never intentional. Here it had been near-impossible to not get consumed. Her military job was, amazingly, not as stressful as this. She's just grateful this wasn't a full-time occupation. How Kikara and the others managed to handle it year-round is beyond commendable.

Kikara hunches her upper body forward, bringing her elbows to rest on her knees. "I know it can be tumultuous, especially around this time, but we really appreciate you helping. Even if it's only for a while." Mirasal gives a barely-audible hum in response. Kikara straightens up. "Good, now that *that's* out of the way. It broke again."

Mirasal pushes her bottom lip out, sending a brief impassive look out the window before turning it to look back. "Again huh?"

Her metal chair squeaks as she swiveled it to face Kikara as she reaches over to her side, lifting up her cherished item, its golden surface reflecting the lamp light on the desk, streaking it in bright yellow swirls. Mirasal shuts off the radio as she tilts forward.

"I brought it with me. It keeps flipping and showing the same picture

over and over," Kikara explains, giving a quick animated hand wave. "Susa. I can't part with it." she gives a lopsided smile, her red-brown eyes switching between it and her friend with an expectant expression.

"Let me see it," Mirasal puts her hands out, palms facing up, and the item is promptly placed in them. "I'll have it fixed sometime by tomorrow I'm sure. It's probably the same issue as before," She looks it over, turning it around in her hands, tapping it with her metal finger. She lifts it to her eyes, gazing through the lens, which displayed a beautiful scene of thyacosma cubs with their mother. She knew the artist Tama Shiropelli was a friend of her grandparents. "Yes, it's probably the spring. It's an old model you know," she pauses. "Did you drop it again?"

Kikara's face twists into a grimace. "No, not really..." She hung her head a little, bringing her shoulders up. Mirasal stares at her, tapping the item with her metal finger.

Kikara's hands shoot up. "Alright...maybe it took a tumble down the stairs, but that's all. A simple accident."

Mirasal lets her head fall back against the back of her chair, exasperated. "You know you need to be more care-"

"I know! Absolutely. But this will be the last time I swear," she grabs it from Mirasal's clutches. "It was masare's." she looks it over, trailing her fingertips along the pattern of leaves. "I just can't part with it," she lifts her chin at the desk. "You understand. You keep that ugly old thing," she points at Mirasal's vintage radio, with its worn-out, scratched-up surface and aged buttons. "Look at that! Why do you keep it? It's hideous!"

"It works though," Mirasal gives the top a sharp pat, switching it on, toying with the volume. "Just because something is old, doesn't mean it can't still be useful." She gently takes back Kikara's heirloom from her grasp. "You should understand that too."

"But this is more beautiful than that thing." Kikara argues, still pointedly eyeing the radio, before she notices Mirasal's dejected visage.

"Susa, I just don't understand why you want to keep it, that's all." she says in a tone that's just above a whisper.

Mirasal ignores this comment as she examines the heirloom. "I will fix this. It's just the design of this model is so poor." It could only take so much abuse. The treatment of what was supposed to be a family heirloom was a little appalling. This is the third time she's been asked to repair it; the first when Kikara's nephew had thought it was a toy and broke one of the lenses, which Mirasal had to replace.

Kikara, deciding not to pursue the matter of the ugly old radio further, tipped her head. "Didn't your ahauvo paint that image?" She taps the glass lens.

"No, that was Shiropelli," Mirasal rises up from the chair, switching off the lamp and radio. "The girls are coming soon."

They'd spent the day with her grandparents and her grandfather was due to bring them back soon. She placed Kikara's item among her other treasures scattered on the desk. She'll work on it later.

"They're going with him right?" Kikara stood up and started to follow her.

"Yes and they are really excited...well at least Sarez is. Ineti is a little...reluctant." A week of camping and painting was going to be a dream for her youngest. Her eldest was another matter.

Mirasal headed out the room's door, carved with numerous elegant designs and images of aralia birds and Thyccenian Gods and Goddesses wielding spears. The elaborate doors of the building told in carvings the myths and legends of the planet.

Kikara brushes a stray ringlet out of her face. "That's good. They are such happy girls. I'd say they are doing well now. Under the circumstances anyway. After what happened."

Mirasal glances back at her, giving a small smile. She slows her pace a little, suddenly stopping, her eyes narrowing.

"Miri?" Kikara's voice broke her train of thought. "Susa, I forgot..."

Mirasal waves her good hand, a silent signal not to pursue it. She gave her another smile, one that didn't really meet the sides of her face.

They reach the first floor, stepping out into the lobby, where they hear the pattering sound of feet running in the distance.

"Masare!" Sarez calls out as she ran into Mirasal's arms. "I missed you!" She swings the girl around balancing her on her hip, although she was getting a little big to hold. "Aww, I missed you too. Where's Ineti?" Her eyes searched around, looking for her eldest.

"There," Sarez points down the threshold. "In there."

"Well, let's go see her." Sarez slid down out of her arms, clutching her doll. The one her grandmother had made her, one of its eyes dangling by a single thin thread.

Taking Sarez by the hand, she led her daughter down the hall as Kikara followed close by. Soon her grandfather Galiago emerges from the room to the left, Ineti grasping his hand. The tall, gangly girl beamed as her mother approaches. Galiago gives Mirasal a nod.

"They were good," his voice, monotonous deep and low. "Except Sarez fell down a mudslide."

Mirasal looks down at her youngest, who was trying to obscure her head with her doll. Galiago gave a short laugh, eyeing the smaller girl, who was peeking out from behind her favored toy, a toothy grin on her face. "She loves the mischief."

Before Mirasal could respond, two human women approach. Both dressed in floral print dresses, lips and cheeks painted with the gaudy bright face paint so common among human females.

"Isn't she adorable!" One kneels down by Sarez, who jumped backwards, her doll suddenly becoming a shield.

"They are precious." The second one went to pinch Ineti's cheeks, who ducks behind Galiago, clutching at his arm.

Mirasal lifts her hand up. "Don't do that, pacero, she-"

Suddenly, the first woman reaches out to repeat the same gesture to Sarez, who nips at her finger, letting out a little growl.

"Oh!" The woman's hand shot back as she quickly rises up, her eyes fixed on the girl. "Well they are dear." She gives a fleeting, forced smile as the women quickly scurried down the hall. The sounds of their heels can be heard shuffling against the floor.

"Let's go." Mirasal gently maneuvers Sarez by the hand in the other direction. Her eyes narrowed as she watched the women make their exit, unaware the hushed tones between each other were still audible to Thyenian ears.

"Their children are so feral."

The following morning, Mirasal, Sarez, Ineti, Galiago and Kikara are seated around a round table decorated with a large red plant as a centerpiece and a coral table cloth. Tall, narrow stained glass windows aligned the room, flooding it with breathtaking rainbow light, reflecting off the exquisite gold silverware. The sound of glasses clinking and voices chattering flutter through the air.

Sarez clutched her doll tightly to her chest as she fumbled with her utensils. Ineti ate quietly, slowly taking her time. Kikara's eating habits were what one would expect from someone with a restless personality, rapidly putting bite after bite into mouth. Mirasal's own plate had each bit of food separated; not touching, not mixed together and assorted by color. Her mother was always frustrated with her daughter's eating habits. Foods cooked at different temperatures were not ever going to be on her plate together. Anything mixed was promptly separated.

Galiago glances over at her dish and gave a small smile. His own plate also neatly arranged and sorted.

He then proceeded to look around at all the human tourists, a somewhat lost expression on his face, grumbling to himself as he brought his eyes back to his dish.

Mirasal peers over at him. "I know you used to love this room. but..."

she lets her voice trail off a bit. "It's good for business."

His eyebrows raise. "That it is, that it is." As he returned to his food, Kikara suddenly perks up.

"This time of nero is usually the best." she grins at Galiago, who grunts, giving her a side glance, his fork clinking against the pearly-white glass of his dish, now almost empty.

"Hopefully, we won't get another incident like the one with that human Duchess." he mutters as Mirasal shifts in her seat, sending a look in Kikara's direction. Her friend drops her head, eyes roaming over her food.

"I don't think she was a real one." Mirasal suggests. No, real members of royalty didn't behave like she did. They tend to refrain from drawing attention to themselves as they come to the hotel for the anonymity it offers. She did the opposite. Her eagerness in showing off her 'riches' was a dead giveaway.

Kikara remains mute, face down, pushing bits of food around with her fork. Occasionally her eyes curve up to glance in either direction of the other two adults at the table.

Galiago blew a weary sigh through his lips. "Real or not, we can't have that happen again. The scene she made. That was an embarrassment-and bad for the hotel."

They continue eating silently before Galiago speaks up again. "I made a case for the medals. I know you like the one you keep them in, but it's old and falling apart, so I made a new one," he takes a bite before he continues. "It's back at the house, but I can bring it to you when we return."

"I don't have them," Mirasal suddenly sits back in her chair, dropping her fork against her plate. She slouches, arms folded.

Galiago's head abruptly lifts up. "Imarito's medals! You didn't keep them?"

Nearby guests turned their heads in their direction.

Mirasal leans in over her dish. "Tapia has them." she whispers through gritted teeth.

"What the iado is she doing with them?"

"She took them after he died," she falls back against the chair again. "The girls said she came in while I was away. She refuses to return them," She taps her foot, gnawed on her lip, keeping her arms folded across her. She suddenly reaches up and takes a few strands of hair in her flesh hand, twirling it. "I can't get them back."

"Don't worry," Galiago says, doing a gentle reassuring gesture of his hand. "We will, we will."

She runs her flesh hand repeatedly over her mane. Her foot still heatedly tapping as she slides her dish away from her.

Lucinda and Hank Dobson arrive that morning with their young son, Colin in tow, along with several pieces of luggage, large and small. Kikara greets them at the entrance. "Buna diwas!"

Mrs. Dobson is the first to respond to the welcome. "Hello...can you take these please?" She hands a small, brown suitcase to Kikara, who grasps the gold metal handles of the surprisingly heavy item. "And be careful, my most valuable things are in that one."

Despite her curt manner, Mrs. Dobson, a striking woman with jet black hair and a tiny waist is giving a warm smile. "I'm sorry, my dear, it's just I have one particular item in that one that's very valuable and can't be replaced." Her husband is a nondescript-looking kind of man, with a head of thinning brown hair and a white polo shirt with plaid pants.

"Hello," he grabs Tomah's hand as he takes his luggage. "Nice place you got here." Tomah, bristling somewhat at the gesture, gives an affirmative nod. Humans were all about hand shakes on first meeting, something he'd yet become accustomed to.

Little Colin is dragging his own fairly large white suitcase with his small hands, plastered with stickers of various cartoon characters and

'Colin' written in bold dark-blue letters across the surface. A scraping sound follows him as he pulls it along the floor.

"Hey little one, let Tomah take that," Kikara glances back and gives a little gesture with her hand. "Go ahead."

Tomah moves to liberate the boy from his struggle, the child giving a him a look of relief.

"What's in this?" Tomah teases, lifting the suitcase languidly up and down. "It's like carrying a load of rocks."

Colin grins, displaying his deep dimples and gap-tooth. "It's my toy soldiers and their tanks. They're very heavy." he giggles, dimples deepening on either cheek. He freezes when he sees his mother's stern look.

"Oh, and my clothes and stuff. I packed it myself!" He stands looking proud, sticking his chest out, the cartoon duck printed across the front of his red shirt prominent and misshapen around the outline of his belly.

"Aw, that's great!" Tomah gives him a light head pat. "I couldn't be bothered at your age. Ha!"

The group make their way down the lobby towards the large majestic stairwell, dominated at the end of each railing by a statue of a thyacosma, a neutral expression embedded into their features, showcasing the animals peaceful nature. Kikara points up towards the top. "I'll show you to your room."

As the family make their way up the steps, little Colin tugs on Tomah's light orange vest.

"That cave out back?" Tomah halts, looking down at the boy. "Is it haunted? My friends told me it was."

"No, most you'll find is stunebugs," Tomah says breezily. "Just animals make their home there. Like these," he points to one of the statues at the foot of the railing. "And they're not going to harm you. No spirits though. Your friends were mistaken." He continues his climb up the steps, when he glances over his shoulder to see if the

boy is following along, he stops.

The color of Colin's cheeks have drained. "Bugs...?"

Tomah whirls around with his free hand up. "No, no, no. They're pretty harmless." Though the red and black insects do sting if affronted, but it's seldom. He thinks it best not to tell the boy, as he is already a little apprehensive. He'll relate the warning to his parents.

In the room, as the family settles, Colin approaches the window, gazing down at the aforementioned cave.

Seeing this, Tomah puts a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"No phantoms. I assure you." Colin looks up smiling as the light from the window highlights his blonde hair with golden streaks. His green pupils darted back to the dark entrance, visible but still foreboding in the daylight.

This is the reason he would've rather gone to the beach.

3. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them." –Oscar Wilde **The Picture Of Dorian Gray**

Outside the hotel, deep within the grotto, within the dark musty catacombs of the cave, a rumble came. Loud enough to shake the ground and send the nearby animals running. Scampering towards their underground dens and logs, taking refuge from the approaching threat. The birds, who had been singing merrily were silenced. The crisp leaves fluttering across the surface of the water and the wind brushing through the trees accompany the noise emitting from the cave entrance. The rumble only grows, louder. Louder still. Until it reaches the daylight.

It had been stirred by the stark smell of human flesh. A child's flesh.

It had fed on some poor unfortunate souls who had come across Its path the night before, not the natives to this world, but rather the visiting humans. It had not been on this planet long. How long? It couldn't tell. But not very long. No sense of time. Just traveling across the worlds. Searching. Searching for somewhere. Some place to lay roots. And feed. Oh, how It needed to feed. The ache of the hunger that reverberated throughout It. Insatiable. And now a child is in Its sights. It had only fed on three young boys before leaving Earth, not nearly enough sustenance. It had been that way since It fled. Fled Its hunting ground. How It hated those who had since returned to the weeds. Their deaths did not dampen this intense hatred. Those who had also made It feel that new thing that was completely unfathomable; fear. And the realization It is not the being It thought It was. And the revelation that It was not alone. Both emotions eclipsed by the death of Its young. These feelings had stirred in It a hatred. Its hatred of them was only matched by Its hatred of the stupid old Turtle. That stupid old useless thing, now dead. Determination and strength and bravery had drove It from the personal gaming reserve It had made. Now, it was time for It to make a new one. Just as It had to create a new physical form after Its other was destroyed by those hated ones. A form that took twice as long to manifest. A form weakened by fear.

And It wants no more to feel. No new emotions. No surprises. Just hunger. Hunger and hatred.

Galiago and Mirasal sat side by side on a bench near the back of the balcony. Kikara and the girls sat nearby, with her leading them in a small crafting project involving them spreading colored sand out in designs and patterns. This time would be short-lived, as they had to return to work soon as more guests arrived, as well as the tourists just wanting to see the place and revel in the beauty of the architecture and scenery.

"Look Masare!" Sarez grinned as she pointed to the design she'd made along the ground. "That's beautiful, my love." Mirasal smiles, her voice small, tired. The gentle breeze blowing strands of her auburn mane. They had all wandered outside to spend some quality time together before they said goodbyes. The journey was to last a week, with Galiago teaching the girls how to paint nature scenes as well as hiking and sight-seeing. Far away from here.

Sarez happily continued with her artistry as Ineti sat by her, working on her own, staring intently at the burgeoning creation filled with vibrant blues, reds and yellows.

"Mine's better." Ineti mutters, her eyes still pointedly on her work.

"No, it's not!" Sarez pouts, folding her arms in a huff.

"Girls pacero," Kikara chimes in, placing a hand on Sarez's back. "They are both good. Look," Kikara pours soft pink sand in a perfect circle. "Do it this way." Both girls mimic her, each with a different amount of success.

The sunlight reflected off the sheen of Mirasal's metal hand as she rested it on her forehead, the sound of the two little girls trading quips in the background. Galiago gave her a quick pat on her back. She flinched a little, unexpected physical touches not being her favorite.

Not really his either.

Hugging and giving comforting pats and touches isn't something *either* of them enjoyed, but both understood the need for it, even if each finds it unbearable.

"It will be fine." His voice is hushed, soothing as he stares out over the balcony's edge, elbows on his knees. Her hand slid from her forehead to her cheek.

"I suppose so." she sighs, rocking slightly. She nodded in the direction of her girls.

"All this negativity...I know they feel it. Sarez has been acting out lately, and Ineti is shutting herself off."

She bit down on her lip, her eyes glazed over as she looked out, watching the shadows of the clouds crawl along the landscape below. "I'm glad you can take them out for a while. You sure you can handle them?" She straightened up, giving him an appreciative look, draping her arms across her lap.

He gives her another pat. "I'm sure."

Ineti screaming pierces the stilled air. "No!"

Followed right after by Kikara. "Sarez!"

The girl runs off, taking refuge at the other end of the balcony, having defiled her older sister's creation. "Masare! Look what she did!" Ineti points at the colorful sand with clear fingerprints slashed through it. She runs to her mother, who immediately pulls her in for a comforting hug.

"It's alright. Calm down." Mirasal cradles Ineti's head as she sobs, sending a concerned glance at Galiago. He immediately goes to Sarez, most likely to tell her that what she had done wasn't acceptable. Ineti breaks away and runs just inside the balcony doors. Mirasal follows, sticking her head in the doorway, spying the girl's feet peeking out from behind a large statue.

"I don't want to go." Ineti pleads as she holds back another burst of tears, trying to obscure her face behind the decor. Her hands coming up to block her distraught visage from being seen.

"It will be fine. You'll have fun. You'll learn all kinds of things from ahauvo, alright? And he wants you there," Mirasal holds her hand out. "You can make another and it will be beautiful. I'll talk to Sarez, she'll behave I promise."

Ineti sniffled, wiping her nose with her knuckles. She lets out a quiet exhale before her small hand reaches up to take her mother's. Mirasal gently took her by the shoulders.

"You need to go out and experience things, not hide away. I promise you will have fun." Ineti gives a deep sniffle before she nods, wrapping her small arms around her mother's neck. She buries her face in her chest.

"I wish fasare was here." she mumbles against her.

"Me too." Mirasal breathes.

The night has now darkened the sky, the four moons are dominating the horizon and the stars are twinkling across the black-blue atmosphere. Mirasal sits hunched over her desk tinkering away on Kikara's broken family heirloom.

What's the point. It will break. And break again.

But she'll fix it. Until the day comes it can no longer be fixed. She did understand though. She had her own attachments to certain objects. She glanced up at the old antiquated radio situated at the back of her desk. The one Kikara so despised. She'd found it on a mission some years back. To those around her, collecting such items seemed pointless. They are outdated, worn out, useless. But not to her. She found a certain charm in them. This radio went everywhere with her. And it will continue to, until it falls apart. She loved antiques; they've seen a hundred worlds and been held by countless hands. Their stories are immense and they keep them secret. Just looking at them made you wonder where they've been and who had owned them.

She reached over and fiddled with the dials, until she found a station. A song with a male singer plays, the one known as Buddy Holly. *'Peggy Sue, Peggy Sue, oh how my heart yearns for you, oh Peggy, my*

Peggy Sue.'

Soon however, there was static, the singer's voice submerged in crackling and hissing. She pounded the top of the radio, the action once again causing the song to flare up and resume.

So, it's not perfect, but it works.

The desk was littered with tools and gadgets she'd brought from home and her various tiny wood carvings. Some were of animals, others creatures of folklore. Feeling this need to carve these little tiny figurines was something that calmed her. Her father had been in and out of her life, but one consistent was his teachings about carving; he'd introduced her to it and bought her some tools, small and delicate, appropriate for making intricate designs. Now it was something she was obsessive about at times. She had to make them, or else she gets a little anxious.

"There," she says aloud to nobody in particular. Looking through the lens, seeing the stunning array of beautiful landscapes and animals, recognizing some as her grandfather's works. "Done."

Her left shoulder however, was starting to ache. It needed a break from her prosthetic. These types of pains always came at night. Searing pains that in the past were bad enough to keep her awake. At least they had been before Naseret had given her a serum for it. Something she had developed from the leaves of a plant, the name of which escapes her. She had forgotten to bring it with her, not the first time she'd done so. It was most likely still sitting in the cupboard above her bed in her room back home. It would be a long night without it.

She thought back to her old prosthetic she had built. When she'd entered the military, they had issued her a new one. Much too fancy for her liking. The new limb, they had said, was better made, waterproof and more durable. Hers they said wasn't good enough. Too crude. Flimsy. It was a little insulting. But she missed it. She missed that damn arm since it was the first thing she had ever built. She wished she'd kept it. And it had been *hers*. Technically, this more advanced one belongs to the military. And she'd been used to the old one. Change didn't sit well with her at times.

As she worked, playing with the wires to the unidentified gadget, her mind then drifted to her daughters. Ineti was so much like her and her grandfather. A child of routine. Of focus. Of solitude. She hoped she would enjoy the trip, as she was not an outdoor child, not in the least. There may be some resistance from her, but her grandfather could handle it. He understood after all. Her mother had always said how alike they were. *She's just like you*, Arnamina would say to Galiago. They had always had this rapport, both had a certain way of doing things, ways that not everyone understood. Now, it's clear Ineti was like that too. Sarez however, thrived on being spontaneous, outgoing and loud. She no doubt would do well on the journey.

She took the same approach with Ineti as her mother had with her. Growing up, her mother, thankfully, never tried to normalize her behavior, or made her act in a way that was alien to her nature. But no coddling. No. *No feeling sorry for yourself*, her mother had insisted. Her hand touches her prosthetic, the metal cold.

"Masare." Mirasal's knees were folded up to her chest. "I can't. They'll laugh at me." Mirasal's hand shot to her left stump. The limb she'd been born without. Arnamina, bends down to where her daughter sat.

"My child, you cannot hide yourself away. You must go out, and play with those other children. You must learn how to go out and just face the world. You are going to do just fine."

She gently pulled her daughter up to look her in the eye. "Now I want you to go out there and play, and don't worry. You will make friends and those who laugh, their opinions do not matter. Now go. Go play."

Mirasal, trying pointedly to avoid her mother's eye contact, nodded, and slowly made her way towards the front door, the clear sounds of children on the other side of it.

Mirasal opens the door and starts to step outside. She pauses, looking back at her mother, her eyes wide with worry.

"Go ahead," her mother prompts. "Don't hide yourself away. Go out and look others in the eye."

Mirasal nods and heads out.

The door shuts.

She straightens up and stretches, giving a little groan as the pain intensified. She should quit for the night. She made her way over to the window, brushing the curtain aside, watching as the night strips the grotto of its beauty, replacing it with heavy shadows and murkiness. Her gaze is drawn to the crystal moonlight creating shards of white streaks along the water's surface, the only highlight among the tenebrous area.

She then notices something else; movement near the cave entrance, barely visible. A flicker, a dash of two yellow specks. She inches closer to the window, pulling back the curtain, eyes narrowing in focus as she brings her face near the glass.

It vanishes as quickly as it appeared. An animal, no doubt.

She flicks off the lamp and radio and heads to her bed.

In another room, Candice "Candy" Swain was prepping herself. She had been at the Terog a week. Customers, however, were few and far in between. Mostly she had got in a few male guests. Men who either had a wife or were traveling alone. The former was rare. The married ones can't slip away from the significant other for too long. Certainly not if they have kids. The singles, were lonely and mostly kept her in mind-numbing and dull conversations. Usually whining about how awful their life was. They largely paid her for her company, sometimes with no sex taking place. She had spent the entire night before spooning a nerd who was on the planet hoping it would mimic the video games he'd played. Mostly, he struck out with the alien women he'd hoped would be as receptive as they are in the media he consumed. Movies, games, and books spin stories of alien beauties seducing humans and spiriting them off to a life of love and adventure.

But the reality is far more complicated. Different culture. Language barrier. The aliens were complex, intelligent. Hard workers from what she'd observed. No, this new era was not anything like it has been portrayed. Not at all. And Candy wasn't sure she wanted any more part of it. It seemed like a glamorous life, but it's not like being

in a foreign land; it's a whole different universe. For a woman who'd previously only traveled to different continents, it had been a bit unnerving at first, but soon she realized it was the same as her home world. Just a few changes in the rules. And species.

She exited her room, a slinky red dress molded to her body and a matching clutch. Her platinum blonde hair pinned up with but a few strands flowing freely behind her long neck. Time to earn her keep. Maybe she'll hit the jackpot tonight.

"Hey, sweetie," she waves at Tomah. "See you later on tonight... maybe not 'till morning." She winks as he gave a friendly wave in return. She'd already tried to approach him, but he's got a wife. Or a 'mate' as they say and is clearly faithful. She'd already been with one Thycenian male. The experience not so far removed from that of a human. The biology not too different, thank goodness. The hair along their bodies, however, makes it a little inconvenient. While her lifestyle isn't what they call 'honorable,' here, at least nobody has been outright hateful or abusive about it. At least so far.

Her musing about Tomah makes her mouth twist as she thinks of her own, brief early marriage. Just picturing his mug caused her body to tense.

That fucker.

She made her way down to her main area of networking; the hotel's bar. Hopefully, tonight will be better than the last.

Hopefully.

4. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"But he who dares not grasp the thorn, should never crave the rose."
Anne Bronte

Candy sat with her shapely legs crossed on a small smooth white couch in the far corner of the bar. Sipping her cocktail, observing the underwhelming set of patrons. Mostly human. She hated being so picky, since she was in dire straits, but she was selective. It was her nature. Her gaze is directed to a loud ruckus forming at the far end of the club with a man making something of a scene, fighting with another man. A clear shot of punches being thrown in between the group of onlookers starting to gather. There are shouts egging the men on and a woman screaming.

"Stop it you assholes!"

Candy makes eye contact with one of the spectators standing quietly by. A very unusual looking specimen, not anyone she'd seen around. The man was strangely handsome, with high cheekbones and full lips, dressed in a black suit, a small red scarf tucked in the left breast pocket. The light of the bar reflecting blue streaks in his auburn locks. A cigar sits in his mouth. Who smokes cigars anymore? Usually just the older men, but no matter.

"Mhmmm," She peers at him from behind her glass. Their gazes stay locked into each other.

Almost as if reading her mind, he approaches her. Adjusting his dress coat as he saunters up.

"You human?" she asked, sipping her drink. He certainly looks it, anyway. There were some species that were merely human-passing. They gave her the creeps for some reason, but hey, whatever she can get. And he's not bad looking. She could just pretend he was human, unless of course he's got some weird biology down there. In that case, she's going to have to flee the room.

Something she's done before.

He flashed an amused smile, his amber-tinted golden eyes giving her the once over. He removes his cigar. "If you want me to be." Smoke meandered from between his lips as he spoke, his voice slightly gravelly with a faint lisp. He took another drawn-out drag, puffing out a series of 'o's' in smoke. He smiles, displaying a pair of buck teeth.

She let out a guffaw. "Whatever, hun," she licks her lips. "Want some company? Unless, of course you're into those Thycenian broads..." she plays with the stray hairs behind her neck. "And they're rather expensive. And from what I hear they got razor blades between their legs."

He studies her, giving a contemplative expression as he plucks the cigar from his mouth. His smile widens, as he holds out a large hand. "Shall we?"

She takes a last sip of her cocktail and takes it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. "I suppose that's a yes," she pats his chest. "You're an eager one, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I am." he grins, looking away in the direction of the bar's exit as they approach. She squeezes his arm. "I'm Candice by the way. Although folks call me Candy. Or Doll Face."

"Robert. Robert Gray."

"Well Mr. Gray, it's nice to meet you. Now ya' got any sort of...kinks I should know about? I like to be warned ahead of time."

"Well..." he gives her side glance. "I do have a ferocious appetite, you can say."

Oh, honey they all say that.

He returns the stogie to his mouth as they reach his room. He opens the door, bowing slightly.

"Ladies first."

As she enters, she frowns when she sees another woman sitting on his bed, wearing a lavender dress with illustrious black curls splayed around shoulders. The woman introduces herself.

"Veronica."

Yes, Candy had seen her around the Terog. They hadn't really spoken. This was sure going to be awkward.

"Oh, I see," she says as she tosses her clutch on the bed and sits, lounging back on her arms. She brings her hand up to examine her dark red nails. "You know this is gonna cost extra?"

He grins, shaking off his jacket and meticulously unbuttoning his dress shirt. "I'll make it worth your while. I promise."

In the room, during the act, both women scream. Blood curdling screams that nobody hears.

Samuel staggered out the hotel bar's back exit, too intoxicated to walk straight. His hands against the wall kept his balance. Everything in his vision was melted together, blending into each other. He managed to make it around the corner of the building, hands still grasping whatever he can touch. He finally falls to his knees, the punch in the gut he'd received from the boyfriend of a woman he'd tried to solicit had rendered him weak, sluggish, almost on the verge of vomiting.

Hey, those types of women all look alike anyway. How was he to know? She was certainly dressed like one.

He stumbles down the hill of the back of the hotel, certain this isn't the way to his room. Eh, fuck it. Maybe he'll go for a dunk in that grotto. The tip of his boot catches a small rock, his face meeting the ground, his nostrils filling up with the smell of the freshly-cut grass. As he manages to lift his head up, spitting out pieces of sod, that's when he sees her; a woman, decked out in lavender, black curls outlining her pale face. She coaxes him towards her, smiling.

"Hey, baby, come with me," She pulls the top of her dress down,

exposing her breasts. She continues beckoning him with her hand waving. "Come on!" She dashes behind the bushes.

"Whaaa the fuck—" he slurs as he stares vacantly for a second, noggin wobbling, blinking rapidly at the row of shrubs. He then quickly pulls his lean torso up, his legs like rubber, feeling like they could give out at any moment. He starts to teeter in her direction where she was behind the bushes. He pauses as he sees her, her back to him. As he gets closer, his arm extends a shaky hand. He touches her shoulder blade, wrangling her around to face him.

He grips both her shoulders, his pupils start to focus and his eyelids bat away the blurriness as he sees large worms slithering around her eye sockets. Maggots and other insects, pus dripping from where her mouth would be, pooling at their feet.

When what he is seeing registers, the sight sends him flying backwards, his hands breaking his fall. He cries out as his wrist snaps against the ground. She starts to follow, limping, swaying back and forth as she walks languidly. Samuel lets out a strangled scream, trying to scramble away as he slips on mud, gripping his injured wrist, the pain like a hot poker stabbing his arm. He continues to slip on the mire, his feet sliding at every effort to push himself up. Just then she lunges forward, snatching him by his ankle and dragging him back behind the bushes. His good hand attempts to grasp onto whatever there is as she pulls him towards the cave, one of his nails breaking off at the base as it catches a rock embedded within the soil.

"Beautiful fear." she says, her voice unnatural, the pus gargling in her mouth, spittle hitting his face as she brings her mouth down, now having sprouted yellow-tinged sharp incisors.

His screams are silenced by the loud sound of bones cracking and blood splattering.

The early morning light began to reflect on the glass of the window of Mirasal's room, spreading along the floor, nightstand and bed, shining on her face. She had slept well, at least her arm pain had subsided. For now anyway. She sits up in the bed, rubbing her eyes. She groggily looks around before rising and stretching her good arm

behind her back, a yawn escaping her. She strolled to the window and looked down, the area coated with a thin layer of fog. Peaceful. Quiet.

Grabbing her prosthetic that was on the nightstand, she gently attached it to her stump, groaning as a slight ache still went through it. Looking down at the grotto, she quickly dressed; her favorite blue frock with the darker blue trim and metal collar with silver sandals. On the way out her door she grabbed up an empty intricately-weaved basket as well as her canlura, the small flute-like instrument her mother had taught her to play. Many Thycenian folk singers incorporated the instrument into their music. She wasn't particularly good at it, but it was relaxing.

The music would be her only company this morning.

She made her way downstairs treading softly, tracing her prosthetic along the golden railing, gliding through the hallways, past the rooms filled with guests, nothing but stillness behind the doors. She went out the back entrance, and down the small hill, drinking in the dewy smell of early morning.

She held her canlura with one hand, the other arm threaded through the handle of the basket. She softly starts playing a song she'd heard through the radio, singing the lyrics inwardly to herself. *'When I feel blue in the night, and I need you to hold me tight, whenever I want you, all I have to do is dream.'*

She made her way to a thick tree ripe with tagro, the small red, sour-tasting fruit that grew in this area. They were good for pies if the strong taste was diluted somewhat. Radaha, the hotel's Neeyotyto cook, had asked her to collect a good amount. She stood under the arms of the tree, humming the same tune as she plucked the fruit, checking to see if each was ripe. Usually a slight squeeze was enough to tell.

It awoke. Hearing a sound. Multiple sounds. What is that? It couldn't place what they were at first. Some kind of music, it seems. Not particularly offensive. But disrupting it none the less. It had fed again. A long night of hunting. Hunting the visiting humans. They made the more delicious meal. More than the natives of this world. Their taste was

somewhat foul. The fur that covered their bodies also making them difficult to consume. And their flesh was not as delectable as a human. They were a curious species, these ones. Smarter than humans, but not quite the being It is. Not quite. But It could sense the violence. Of this planet. Of this species. Of their culture. Perhaps that is what drew It to this world. The incredible violence It sensed. The violence It so relished. This violence, however, does not provide any delicious food. That comes from the visiting humans. They came to this planet. They were Its prey. Its sustenance. It would feed. And feed well here. This cave makes for a fitting place to conceal Itself.

The sound. It followed it. Down the dark twists of the cave. Towards the opening light of the cavern. That was when It heard the sounds growing louder and louder as It approached, hearing the soft hum of a female voice.

Outside the entrance, It saw her. Its glowing yellow eyes fixed on a Thycenian woman near a tree. It watched as she picked fruit, dropping each into a small basket. Unaware. Unaware It was watching. She would be a perfect prey. But It didn't want to feed on her. It didn't. She was one of them, the natives to this world. The taste would be dull, unfulfilling. Maybe It could jump out, give her a little scare. She'd probably think twice about coming out here again. But no, It didn't want to make the effort to do that, even for amusement. It would have to decipher what her fear was. Why waste Its precious energy on something that tasted badly and would go to waste.

She continues placing the fruit in a basket, before she put a small metal instrument to her mouth, the music It had heard filling the air.

As she played, Mirasal walks over to a large rock crawling with vines that stretched out over the waterside. Standing on its edge, she looks over at the cave, significantly less menacing in the early morning light, framed by low hanging branches and thick moss dispersed around the opening.

There was always something about that cave, something she never really liked. Childhood fears really. But even now, there was something about it that was off-putting. She brought her hand up as a subtle throbbing went through her head.

Must be the weather. She sits down and begins to unstrap her sandal, still looking at the darkness of the entrance.

"You go in!" Naseret shoved her twin forward as Aradea watched silent.

"No! You!" Mirasal's hand jetted backwards to shove Naseret in front of her, farther towards the cave. Aradea in her sign language communicated to her older sisters that they need to leave. Mother is expecting them back inside. The older girls, however, brush her off and continue their bickering.

"There's something in there. Hypadando himself could be in there." Naseret's head is shaking from side to side rapidly. "You go."

"Fine I'll go!" Mirasal starts towards the entrance, a pressure forming in the pit of her stomach. Inching closer, her tiny feet making their way over the slick stepping stones across the water. The sound of the insects in the area deafening in the tense silence. She turns back at Naseret, who's backing away slowly, a smirk on her lips

"Well go on. You say there's nothing hiding in there," her voice becoming more mocking. "Prove it."

Mirsal turns back to the cave, feeling like the entrance could close down on her at any minute, trapping her inside. The feeling growing more heavier with each step closer. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind comes, whistling through the caverns, causing it to make an otherworldly howling noise.

All three girls run, the sound seeming to pursue them. Their screams dying in their throats as they get farther away.

Standing up on the rock, she whips her head to the side when a sudden breeze comes up, blowing leaves in her face. The sweet smell of rain on her nostrils.

A storm is on the way.

Gazing around the area, continuing to hum that same tune, the fog starting to dissipate. She turns her head skyward when she hears a group of aralia birds, their ebullient calls to each other shatter the quiet. Old tales used to warn their cries were a foreshadowing of something ominous. War, a death in your family, sickness.

Taking a deep breath, she unlatches her metal collar. She peels her dress off, letting it drop around her ankles before stepping out of it. She ran both hands through her mane, glancing around before she then dove into the water head first.

The shock of the cold was fleeting as she emerged. The colder, the better. Swimming in icy water, she had discovered in recent years, aided her arm pain. She tilted her neck back, giving the back of her head another dip. She kicked her feet up, sprawled her arms out and drifted, eyes looking upward, watching the birds pass over her. Just their chirping and other various wildlife around; the sound of something scattering through the bushes, the faint cries of a thyacoma cub searching for its mother. She was going to enjoy the peace and the fresh air.

Kikara hadn't eased up on her since she arrived. Granted she needed the help, since the hotel was understaffed and not one sane individual wanted to take on the tourists, their undisciplined children, and the disrespectful and demanding guests. She was starting to think spending her time being verbally abused by an entitled human wasn't how she wanted to spend her time off.

She straightened, looking around at the scenery becoming more dark pink tinged with blue and purple, the color of the foliage peeking through the thick cloud of gray. She lifted her flesh hand out of the surface of the water, catching a tiny stunebug that she gently flicks off. She'd forgotten they were abundant in this area.

As It observed her from the discreetness of the cave, a feeling began to stir. A familiar craving It had felt before. Not a new feeling, certainly. The laws of taking on a physical form meant having certain urges It heartily welcomed, as It could use some recreation. As It watched her, It decided...

It wanted her. Not as prey, no, but It wanted her. She was beautiful, without question. A creature far more beautiful than any It had seen on this world or any other. More beautiful than the fear that It craved.

And It wanted her.

It watches as she stepped out of the water, studying the parts of her that were more human, others that were more like that of a beast. She took her

mane in her hands and began to wring it out, looking around, the water having given her metallic prosthetic a blurry sheen. Still unaware It was watching. She approached a large rock and picked up the tiny silver instrument. She put it to her lips and slowly began to spin around. The music begins again, her body and feet moving along with it. It watches, curious as she twirls around, arm out, the other holding the instrument to her lips.

"Mirasala!"

Another one came into view. She stopped her movements and looked over at the other, startled, eyes wide. The two women bantered in their native tongue. One It could not decipher. The conversation brief and tension-filled.

"Come now, the guests are starting to wake. I need help with serving," Kikara motioned for her to follow. "Quickly, before somebody sees you. And did you pick the fruit?"

"Yes I did. I'll be right in." Mirasal replies, lowering her canlura, a little embarrassed. At least she was dry enough now. The dread was rising up through her.

Serving, ugh.

Humans tend to make what they call "small talk," something she considered pointless and time-consuming, and she's just not good at it. But some were delighted with the idea of conversing with a non-human. More than a little condescending.

She made her way to the large rock where her clothes lay, letting out a sigh as she did, brushing aside her dampened mane out of her face.

Here we go. As she dressed and started slipping on her sandals, her foot perched on a small rock, she noticed something.

No sound.

Only the soft wind sending the leaves blowing, their tips barely touching along the surface of the water as they danced across towards the other end of the grotto. No animals, no birds singing. Nothing. Just the breeze and the pungent smell of the impending

rain. But everything had just suddenly gone dead. She was bent over slightly, her head turned, looking at the cave entrance as she finished buckling the last strap of her sandal. She snatches up her basket of fruit, placing her canlura atop it and started towards the hotel's back entrance, watching Kikara walking up the hill in the distance.

Mirasal gradually started speeding up, her fruit basket rested on her left hip, her movements risking spilling some tagro over the edge, that familiar tightness in the pit of her stomach forming. Throwing quick glances back at the cave over her shoulder as she nears her destination.

It watched as she made her retreat. Watched her enter the hotel. The same hotel that had been Its hunting ground. It had felt her apprehension of the cave. Read some of her memories. But It wanted to see more. Wanted to know about these Thyenians. What they were like behind a closed bedroom door. The crude comment by the human female the night before had left It wondering.

And It would find out. A challenge to mitigate Its boredom.

It exited the cave in the avatar of Robert once again, discarding Its favorite form for now. Adjusting Its gray suit, Its black dress shoes clicked along the stepping stones as It made Its way towards the hotel.

Overhead, a muffled rumble, as leaden clouds begin to form in the morning sky, threatening the rays of daylight and the distant cries of the aralia can still be heard.

5. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"I noticed that once you realize someone's watching you, it's pretty hard not to find yourself watching them back." —**Meg Rosoff, How I Live Now**

The storm was still in its infancy. There was light sprinkles and clouds, occasionally dabbing out the sunlight. The rolls of thunder were, however, few and far in between. The magnificent multi-colored light of the dining area now painted down in duller, bleaker colors. The weather seemed to reflect the attitude of the guests, since many were more subdued than normal. It was, surprisingly quiet, save for the rowdy Muncy twins, giggling as they toss small bits and scraps of food at each other. The two boys are soon reprimanded by their parents, but eventually return to their food fight. Teora sighs as she eyes them, heading to the kitchen to retrieve a broom.

Mirasal brings out a plate to a human man with auburn hair, dressed in a light gray suit, a red scarf poking out from the left breast pocket. Seated near the kitchen, a cigar nestled between his lengthy fingers, puffing away, streams of thin smoke snaking their way around his head. He smiled as she placed his dish in front of him, removing the cigar to look her over. She takes a moment to adjust the dish in proportion to his glass along with his utensils. Moving each a little bit to accommodate.

"Um, it's alright." he grins as she tucks her hands behind her, realizing what she was doing.

"Susa." she says, flashing a brief smile and letting out a small cough as she fans the smoke away from her mouth.

Why must they do that indoors? Granted, it's allowed...

"Oh, apologies." he mutters as he peers up at her. She watches in silent horror as he quickly smashes it in the bottom of a small delicate crystal bowl, meant to host candy. Certainly not meant to be an ashtray. But she was used to this type of crassness from humans.

Or perhaps human-passing. Those types blend in very well with the tourists.

"That's not really meant for that." she says, gaze on the ruined dishware. He glances at her and the bowl.

"It's a bowl though. What's it for?" he frowns.

"Not that. It holds candies."

"Well sorry. Again." he replies, an annoyed hint in his voice. He then lowered his head to loudly sniff the food on the plate, drawing glances from guests nearby, thick strands of copper falling over his face. "What is it?"

"Fish. We're fish people." she replies, removing her attention from the glass bowl. Maybe he's not pleased with it. Oh well, it's all Radaha had made. In fact it seemed to be the only thing she knew how to make really well. That and tagro pie.

His eyes peered up at her. They were huge and a deep golden with specks of amber. He was pleasant-looking, striking even. He looks down to inspect his plate again. "Thank you. And, hey can I get your na-"

He stops and scowls when he sees she's already hurrying off to the kitchen.

"Terok is such a lovely place!" the short, blonde stocky woman exclaims, her joyful grin spread ear to ear, the yellow dress suit she wore standing out like a sore thumb against the room's backdrop of dreariness. "It's so beautiful this time of year...or," she fingers her white pearl necklace, looking out the window. "At least it would be..."

She was one of the few guests left in the dining area. Mirasal, busy assorting tiny candies by color in an ornate bowl, the sound clinking against the porcelain, looks over at her.

"You're saying it wrong. It's Terog. It means 'life'." she says, shifting in her chair, pulling on the blue fabric of her dress. The woman's eyes

darted to her.

"Really? Oh, how awful!" her hand shoots to her cheek. "Te-ROG." She pronounces it slowly, making sure to do the rolled 'r' sound. She does it repeatedly, seemingly delighting in the sound her tongue makes. She giggles as she sips her drink and continues repeating the word.

At least this one was trying. Unlike the other "toristats" who regularly bastardized the Terthach language, totally disregarding proper pronunciation.

"Yes, that's correct." Mirasal smiles, bringing her glass up to her mouth. The woman looks pleased.

"It's not so difficult. I'd love to learn more." She stares off, tilting her head slightly, seemingly contemplating this option.

Kikara, in her usual high pitch, offers. "There are language teachers if you want," she picks at the bits of food still left on her plate. "It's not an easy language to learn though."

She and Mirasal silently exchanged glances, doubting the woman was serious. Usually it's a fleeting moment of curiosity, but not a real commitment. Learning the language of another race was at times only a passing interest to the humans who made their way through the hotel. Mostly it was a way for them to seem cultured, something to show off to people back home, but nothing more than that. A novelty really.

The woman acknowledges Kikara's suggestion as she rises from her chair. "I think I'll consider that," she tosses her hair back. "See you tonight." Her plastic bracelets jingle as she gives a little wave, disappearing through the exit.

"Ugh, thank Araseza," Kikara states in their native tongue, ensuring the remaining guest, the auburn-haired man in the gray suit, would not understand her griping. "Thought she'd never leave."

She places her hands on her lower back as she stretched, groaning. "Between her and those obnoxious Muncy boys. Is that it? Muncy?" She swats at Tomah's hand as he passes by, attempting to steal a bite.

"Yes," he offers in response to her query. "That's it." He disappears behind the swinging door of the kitchen to get his own plate.

Kikara sits her elbows on the tabletop. "Doubt she's serious about it. She seems a little dense."

Mirasal gave a little hum in response. "Yes, she'll probably have forgotten about it by tonight. Oh, and I fixed it, you can come and pick it up when you're ready." she says, changing the subject to the broken heirloom. Kikara gives a wide smile.

"Grazach." She tilts back, putting one foot up on the table. Mirasal scowls at this and in a swift movement, grabbed her ankle and pushed her leg off, nodding in the man's direction

"Oh, I doubt he cares." Kikara gives a small dismissive hand motion, popping in her last piece of food in her mouth. Mirasal shook her head as her eyes were drawn to him again.

He was staring at her. And not being subtle about it.

She quickly averted her gaze back down to the bowl of sweets, now organized in neat color-coded piles. Her eyes flick to Kikara, who studies her a second.

"What is it?" she asks, taking a piece from the candy bowl, trying not to scatter them. Mirasal draws her head closer to her.

"He's staring at me."

"I noticed that earlier. He turned around every time he heard you coming in, after you served him," Kikara replies in between bites. "You know what it is though, they hear how wild we are. Those human men...if he is human anyway. Might be passing. In that case, how fortunate for him. We aren't so blessed though."

Mirasal fidgets in her chair, giving him another brief glance. She hadn't noticed, with the sea of guests that had been in there. After she made the faux pas with the plate and his crude behavior with the candy bowl, she'd not given him another thought after that. She personally hadn't really been approached by any human males, possibly do to her introverted personality. They seemed to sense she

wouldn't be interested. Kikara on the other is more gregarious. She'd had plenty of suitors. Although, sometimes they were intimidated by the height of Thycenian women.

Kikara stifled a giggle. "He's undressing you with his eyes," she ducks swiftly as a metal hand swings at her. "Careful with that. You could hurt me."

She dodges her further. Mirasal smirks. "You're being crude," she says as she continues to swat at her, more as a silencing tactic than with any serious intent.

Mirasal then stands, grabbing up her cup, the glass clinking against her metal palm. "I'm leaving now," she gives Kikara a disapproving look. "I have to dust the lobby."

She glided around the table, Kikara's eyes follow her. "Alright," she says in a sing-song voice, doing a slight rocking in her seat.

Mirasal glances back, playfully poking her tongue out at her friend, with Kikara mimicking the action. In doing so she caught another glimpse of the man in the process.

He was still staring. He suddenly gave her a broad smile, accompanied by a little wave.

She pauses, watching him, before reluctantly giving a small wave in return. She then looked straight ahead as she hurriedly made her way to the kitchen, fingering the shining silver collar of her dress. She hadn't seen him around anywhere before, clearly just another tourist or immigrant. She washed her cup out and placed it in the cupboard, sending a quick look down at the basket of fruit she'd delivered earlier. She then peeks out the small round window of the kitchen's door, trying to be discreet.

The man was gone.

Radaha, noticing her sleuthing, queries, "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

"Susa, chiama Dobson," Kikara assures Mrs. Dobson who was pacing back and forth in her room, her face a faint pink, her glossy jet-black hair now unkempt. "We sent Tomah to find it. We know it's here somewhere."

The Dobsons had previously been smiles and a refreshingly polite attitude. But a missing music box had brought out a change in attitude, rather abruptly.

"Well you had better!" Mrs. Dobson stalked towards Kikara, hands on hips, a bold move for a woman a good foot shorter.

Humans were all so tiny.

"That is a family heirloom! And I know it has to be here," her head whips around to her husband. "Help me you idiot!" she stomped towards him. "I gave it to YOU to put in a safe place!" her finger wags in his face. "I told you to!"

Colin stood off to the side, fidgeting with his toy, his eyes turned upwards at his mother as Mr. Dobson remains mute.

"Yes," Kikara urges. "I completely understand what it means to you."

Mirasal stood off by the window, hands folded in front of her, listening. Listening to the claps of thunder, the rain pelting the windows. Eventually, these sounds start to drown out the woman's voice. She stares off, raising her hand to stroke it over her head.

"You!"

The woman's booming voice jolted her. "You," she was looking at her now. "Don't just stand there."

Mirasal looks over at Kikara. "It could be they sat it somewhere and the boy moved it..." she offers in Terthach. Kikara gave her a tacit smile in response. She didn't want to blame him, nor did she want to voice this opinion in front of them, but from her own experience with her daughters, it was certainly a possibility that he had decided it was a plaything, broke it and hid it so it wouldn't be discovered.

"Oh don't think we don't realize you are talking about us when you

speak in that strange language," Mrs. Dobson's eyes narrow as she approaches her. "We know."

Awful woman. Awful, awful. I guess learning their language won't be an option for this one.

The woman's erratic dilated pupils move speedily between her and Kikara.

"Come along Miri." Kikara grabbed Mirasal's flesh arm as she made her way to the door of the room. Mrs. Dobson's stern, slightly crazed gaze follows them as they exit.

When they were out of earshot, Kikara let out an elongated sigh, letting go her friend's arm.

"Did you see the look on her mate's face? Surprised he hasn't decided to end it." She stops, freezing, looking at Mirasal, who has paused beside her.

"Didn't mean to say that." Kikara says sheepishly. Mirasal gives a quick dismissive hand gesture.

"Don't know if I can make it through this nero. Not this time," Kikara says shaking her head. "What a complete change though. She was all smiles not too long ago. And did you see her eyes? She looked like a madwoman," she shoots a glower back at the room. "All this abuse over a stupid music box!"

"Well it means something to her, you should understand that," Mirasal chewed her bottom lip. "Wonder where it is, though?"

Sure, the boy could have, but there were other possibilities too. She looks at Kikara out of the corner of her eye, who starts walking, taking long strides down the stretch of the hallway. She looks back and gives a small shrug. Mirasal stayed in place, watching as she vanishes around the corner of the hall.

Part of Its mind kept watch as the two were berated by the human woman, the other was on the look-out for possible prey. It had already set Its sights on the small boy in the room, around eight. It taking the music box would create enough of a distraction for the boy's parents. However,

there were scant few children around. It would have to settle for adults. As It had been doing. It had first spied the child gazing out the window of the third floor. Not much. But enough for now. It must be patient.

It waited. Waited for the right moment to present Itself to her again. It had not made the best impression on her earlier. Something It would have to rectify. Perhaps taking on the form of a human was ill-advised, as there is, It sensed, some negativity directed towards them here. But it would not be too comfortable in the form of one of the natives. Unfamiliar to It. It prefers a skin It is familiar with. Besides, being in a strange physical form would result in behavior that could draw attention to It.

Dusting. Everyone else found it tedious, but for Mirasal, it was relaxing. Almost like a hobby. She picked up each of the stunning crystals that adorned the shelves along the walls of the lobby and wiped them off with a damp rag, trying not to think too much about how the scent of the cleaning fluid made her nauseous.

As she wiped them down, her eyes traced the pattern of red spirals along the cream wallpaper, admired the color scheme of the artworks, noticing the brush strokes on each. The lobby was quiet, desolate, the rain pouring down harder outside was the only other sound in the room along with her radio. She'd brought it to the lobby with her to listen to as she cleaned. When a familiar song came on she started to sing along;

'Little bitty pretty one, come on and talk-a to me, a-lovey dovey dovey one, come sit down on my knee.'

Something hitting her lightly on the back in between her shoulder blades stops her cold. She's not entirely sure if she was imagining the sensation.

She feels something ricochet off her again, with a bit more force. She looks down at her feet; it's a crumpled up piece of paper.

What the iado?

She turns her head to glance behind her.

It was him. The man she had served earlier this morning, seated on one of the chairs behind her, a huge grin pushing his cheeks up, a book splayed open across his lap. Where did he come from? He certainly wasn't there when she came in. And there hadn't been any movement near either entrance. She turned to face him and glared. "Why are you doing that?"

His pleased grin immediately dwindled at her reaction. "I was just playing. I wanted to get your attention," he gives her a wink, fumbling with the tips of the pages of his book. "I was trying to get it earlier."

This is strange. What does he think he is doing? She raises her head, looking down her nose at him. "You again, huh? Where'd you spring from?"

"I just came in. I have a tendency to show up unexpectedly," he smirks, his eyes twinkling. "You're very beautiful. I wanted to tell you before, but you were busy."

She gives a polite smile. *I'm busy now.* "Grazach." she mutters as she resumes her work, turning her back to him.

"What's that?" he asked, standing up as he tosses the book down.

"It means 'thank you.'" she replies, watching him as he approaches her, fingering the lapels of his coat as he does so. She stepped back as he came to a stop in front of her.

Oh, he's tall. Too tall to be a human. She had to actually look up at him slightly, he was at least seven foot.

"Did I embarrass you?" He was right beside her now.

A sweet, unfamiliar aroma met her nostrils as he came closer. "No. I just never get any compliments from the guests...or them throwing things at me." She gives him a once over, her lips drawn in a displeased frown.

"I was only playing. I just wanted to get your attention, since you didn't really notice I was here," he leans his palm on the wall beside her head. "Guess I went about it wrong, huh?"

She gives a half-shrug. He had a slight speech impediment, but not to the point where he was unintelligible.

"Well, um, I have to finish up here." she lifted another crystal as she spoke. *This was all very strange indeed.*

He gives a nod. "Yes, I'll let you get to that. But first, I want to ask you a favor."

She furrows her brows "Oh, what?"

"I'd like you to teach me."

She blinks at him. "Teach...you what?" She tilted her head forward a little, her hand resting on the shelf.

"Your language," he said. "Your culture. I've just arrived on your planet and I'd like to know everything," His stare was intense, his large eyes underlined by the circles under them.

Her top teeth catch her bottom lip, her azure eyes downturned. "I'm not a teacher...I can give you the names of ones-"

"I want you." he insisted, moving closer.

"Why though?" she asked, stepping away ever so slightly.

"Earlier, I heard you correct that woman's pronunciation. I think you'd be good at it," he pauses. "I won't take up all your time. You can play hooky can't you?" He raps his fingertips against the wall.

Her right nostril bunched up. "Play...what?"

A small guffaw burst out his mouth, he smiles at her for a moment before he continued. "Look, just an hour. I promise I will be a good student."

She shakes her head. "No," she really didn't have time for this. "I can't. Susa, I hate to disappoint you." Hopefully, this will persuade him to find a real teacher. And maybe let her do her work.

"What's 'susa'?"

"It means 'sorry.'"

"See? You can teach me all of that."

"I can't. I don't have time." She sends a glance behind him, sizing up the lobby exit.

He comes closer to her, the drumming of his fingertips becoming more pronounced. "You know, I'm going to just keep asking you, until you give in."

This is met with a dirty look. "I don't have time to teach anybody. There are people who can though," she dissuades.

*Who approaches somebody at random and asks them to teach them?
What an odd man.*

"If it's a money issue, I can pay you, for your time. Taking time off from your job-" he urges.

"No, no, it's not that. I don't officially work here. It belongs to my family and I just help out occasionally. But my friend," she gives a fleeting touch to the side of her nose. "Needs assistance."

"You can still assist her. It won't be for more than an hour. I promise. I just want to learn. And I want to learn from you. Look, I'm not like the others that come here. I assure you, I just want some help."

She stayed quiet for a moment, mulling it over. She didn't necessarily want to discourage someone who seemed genuinely interested in their culture. She gives a sigh of resignation.

"Just let me finish up here," she twirls the rag. "Then I guess we can... go somewhere-oh!" she recoils as he tries to boop her nose with an impossibly long finger.

He smiles. "Okie Dokie." he says as he steps back over to his chair, his long legs making few strides necessary to reach the other side. "I'll wait for you. Keep you company." He picks his book up as he takes his seat.

"Oh, you don't need to do that," she held up a crystal. "I'll be a little

while."

"No, I have to make sure you don't try to run off on me." he replies, his face cracking another smile, eyebrows doing an odd wiggle.

"No I won't." she assures, trying to hide the fact that the thought had crossed her mind. Kikara on the other hand was most likely off doing something that had been happening at this time of day, so she wouldn't notice her absence. She glances over her shoulder watching him.

"What?" he asks.

"You're not going to throw something at me again?"

He pouts, a charmingly boyish pout. "I won't," he rested his back against the chair and started whistling. "I'm Robert, by the way."

She looks back and nods. "Mirasal."

"Yes, I know. I heard your friend saying your name."

"Hm," she says as she turns back around as Robert's eyes drift in opposite directions.

It gives a rapid jerk of Its head, Its eyes settling back into place. It had been distracted, her apprehension was amusing It.

Mirasal pauses as she realizes the radio has been mysteriously turned off.

She sends another glance back at Robert, who responds with another grin.

6. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

"A woman being never at a loss... the devil always sticks by them." –Lord Byron

Mirasal was finishing up the last of the glass ornaments. She could feel the weight of Robert's gaze pressing on her back the whole time. He eventually reaches over to where her radio sat in the adjoining chair in order to play with the dials. She'd switched it back on after it had, somehow, during their conversation been turned off. Robert had denied he'd done it. Perhaps it had a passing malfunction. It was certainly working fine now.

"Pacero, don't touch it!" she says as she spins around upon hearing the static sound of the stations skipping. It was always set to a specific one and she hated it being changed. So she left it as it was. His hand jerks back from the vintage item.

"Sorry, jeez." he replies, flipping the left lapel of his jacket as he straightens up.

"It's just, I like that station. I don't want it changed." she explains.

He gives an affirmative nod. "I understand." He sits back, twiddling his thumbs again, watching her resume her dusting. His smile this time is more tame. A little wilted.

Mirasal observes him a moment. Maybe she'd hurt his feelings?

Its apologized more to her now than Its ever apologized to anyone.

In fact, Its never apologized to anyone or anything. Ever. How this woman, this insignificant, mortal creature managed to pull that out of It is somewhat impressive.

But It was done with apologies.

Mirasal casts another look over her shoulder at him, her stomach still nauseous from the cleaning fluid smell. As well as a small throbbing

spreading through her forehead. Between that and his staring, she was grateful to be done. Just as she was putting the last one in its elaborate holder trimmed with patterned gold, she turned around and his face was inches from hers.

"Let me show you a little trick."

She gasps as he plucked the crystal out of her hand. "Careful!" Her hands weave under his as he turned it around in his right palm.

"I am," he says frowning, a wrinkle forming above his nose ridge. He removes a silky red handkerchief from his left breast pocket with his left fingers. "Now watch this."

He drapes it around the crystal, passing his hand over the red material as he holds it. He swiftly yanks the handkerchief away; it's gone.

Mirasal's mouth is agape. "Where is it?" She peers down, inspecting his palm, eyes widening as she studied it. "Where did it go?"

She gives quick little looks around at their feet, as if expecting to see it turn up on the floor near them.

"I believe it's here." He snaps his fingers behind her left ear, presenting the small glass globe in front of her. She steadily reaches up to take it, a smile edging at the corners of her mouth.

"How did you do that?" She holds it, turning it around in her hands as if hoping to find the answer. "Are you someone who does illusions?" It was clearly a trick of the hand.

He smiles wide at her obvious delight. "You can say that. But I can't go revealing my tricks. Now, how about we get started?"

She nods, placing the crystal back in its holder on the shelf. "Yes, we should."

Where shall we go?" he inquires as he reaches down to take her by the hand, giving a baffled look as she pulls back, reaching instead for her radio.

"I have to take this to my room first, though." she says.

"We'll do that, then to my room." he says as he gestures for her to follow. She doesn't know why she agreed to this, since she has no clue how to go about it. Where to even start? Does he want to know about language first? Their traditions? Religious customs? Because that alone gets complicated. The hotel had a combination of both Rykan and Arak imagery, both the major religions of her people. Both with a history of animosity towards each other. The hotel was a neutral environment.

He directs her towards the staircase, his hand lightly brushing her back. She stiffens at the touch. They stop at her room briefly as she returns her radio to its place on the desk, with him peeking in on her as she does so. "What's all that?" he asks, eyeing the clutter circling the radios's space.

"Just...things." she replies as she steps out, shutting the door behind her as he still tries to catch a glimpse. He stares at her a second, before he starts to move, directing her again.

"This way."

He guides her along the hall, threading through the guests passing by them, finally coming to a halt in front of his door, room nineteen. She hadn't realized it was now occupied, since the last guest, a dark-haired prostitute named Veronica Dell had left, rather abruptly.

"Ladies first." he smiles, inviting her past him with a small bow. She gingerly enters, inspecting the area. There are stacks of books on the bed and around the floor, maps and various papers scattered in piles. The room was illuminated a soft red-orange from a single lamp. She takes a step closer and reads the title of one book on a heap at the foot of the bed; *Tarros: The Planet And Its People*.

"Not one I'd recommend," she says pointing briefly at the cover. It had been written by a human explorer, Jacques Champlain, who had taken a few liberties with his writings about Thyenians and their customs. "He...misrepresented us in that book." Mostly, he portrayed them as soulless imperialists. The book had been controversial, she was amazed there was still a copy left after many had been burned.

She looks over at Robert, about to ask him where he retained his when he reaches over and grabs it up with one of his large hands and tosses it aside.

"Okay. Not that one."

At least he's trying to do his research, even if the source is suspect. She watches him remove his coat and place it on the chair in the corner of the room, motioning for her to sit on the bed. She makes room, moving aside some books near the headboard and sits closest to the lamp light. She continues to look around, rubbing her prosthetic palm against her right arm, the coldness of it sending a little chill down her. The room had that same sweet-smelling aroma as him, mixed in with a whiff of cigar smoke.

A little nauseating.

"You surprised?" His eyes are on her when she looks his way.

"Yes." she says bluntly. Might as well be honest. "Not a lot of people are serious." She nibbles her bottom lip, rocking slightly, that throbbing begins in the front of her head again, possibly caused by the strong scent in the room.

"I didn't make the best impression on you earlier, did I?"

"No." Again, honesty.

"I told you, I'm not like the others," his eyelid twitches slightly as he tries to focus on her, the dark half moons under his eyes more prominent due to the lighting in the room. "I can pay for that bowl, if you like."

"It's alright really, don't worry about it."

"My manners aren't...that good sometimes." he says, a lopsided smile appearing.

"Yes, I understand that. But really it's alright. So...where do you want to start?" she says, folding her hands in her lap.

He bends down, picking up a large green book with gold lettering;

Terthach: The Language Barrier.

"Here, this," he hands it to her. "Teach me your words."

She takes the book out of his hand, their fingertips lightly meeting. It was a fairly decent one, which taught basic Terthach phrases, their meaning and origin. Although there are better books, this will do. She flips through the pages.

"So..." She crosses her legs, her right foot starts a rhythmic tapping, slowly at first, then more aggressively.

"Masare is mother. Fasare is father..." She looks at him, however, his attention is directed at her feet. His eyes turn upwards at her, a smile slowly forming on his lips.

"Are you nervous?" He starts to close the space between them, his left arm stretching on the bed behind her back. Her hand shoots to her knee.

"No...it's just a..." she lowers the book, her eyes squinted, looking ahead. "I guess it is a nervous tick? Susa, I didn't mean to distract you." She averts her eyes back to the pages, furiously scanning them, trying to find where she'd left off.

"Well..." he says, his voice an amused lilt. "You are very distracting."

She looks up at him. He's grinning.

Is he...flirting? It seemed like maybe he was in the lobby too.

"We should focus." she's found the paragraph. "Here now, this phrase..." she points to it. "This-"

"Do I make you nervous?" His grin has dropped, his mouth now turned downward. She claps the book shut, resting it on her lap.

"No, not you, just... one on one...I mean in new situations I get..."

"Shy?" he smiles, edging closer to her, her eyes are drawn to the floor as they meet his.

"No...it's...more than that. But it's something that gets easier when I spend more time with somebody," She raises her head, her gaze directed towards the window behind them. She gives a small laugh, running her good hand through her mane. "I'm just bad at this I guess...I'm afraid I'm not going to be a good teacher."

Without warning, he lifts his hand, his long tapering fingers brush strands of hair behind her shoulder. He then crooks a fingertip under her chin turning her to face him.

"You'll do fine. We'll get to know each other. Just relax." His irises are warm with a cluster of orange specks in his pupils from the lamp light. His unexpected touches only momentarily make her tense up, the tight fluttering in her chest soon loosens.

"Alright." she smiles.

"Good." he replies, pulling back from her, putting a space between them again as she slides a bit farther towards the headboard and opens the book again. Sifting through the pages, a question was still on the tip of her tongue. "You haven't really explained why you wanted me," she says, pausing on a page, her eyes searching along the paragraphs. "Who approaches someone at random and asks them to teach them?"

"I said you seem like you'd be good at it. Very particular."

"Because I corrected someone on their pronunciation? There are still others more qualified."

His grin reappears "They're not as beautiful as you, though."

Her eyes flick to him.

Yes, he's definitely flirting.

Mirasal strolls down the hall, a small smile on her lips, stopping at the top of the steps.

Uh-oh.

A groan left her mouth as she spots Kikara standing at the bottom, arms austere folded. "I was looking all over for you. I needed some help cleaning out that closet."

"Susa. I thought you were...preoccupied." Mirasal offers as she reaches the bottom, her pupils to the floor, stopping in front of Kikara as she stares at her blinking.

"Oh....yes," she drops her arms to her side. "I couldn't find Tomah. And Teora was busy in the kitchen," her jaw shifts side to side. "That's not going to be happening again."

Her eyes close tautly, followed by a pause painfully long.

Mirasal treats her to a skeptical glance. "It's not my concern." She starts walking when Kikara stops her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Where were you though?"

"With Robert."

"Who's Robert?" Kikara cocks a brow, letting loose her grip.

"A guest. He wants me to teach him, just language and about our culture. I just gave him his first lesson," she cranes her neck to look up at the top of the staircase. "I'm meeting him again later."

Kikara's face fell. "You know I need help right?" She gives Mirasal's shoulder another light squeeze.

"Yes. I can do both. Teach him and help you. I mean why not?" Mirasal assures. She starts walking again, Kikara's hand slides from her shoulder and she begins to follow.

"So this 'Robert,' who is he?"

"He's a guest. In room nineteen. The man from earlier this morning."

"Wait...the one that was gawking at you?"

"He thinks I'm beautiful, that's all."

"And he's in nineteen? I didn't realize anyone was in there now..."

Mirasal stops to face her. "I guess he must have just checked in?" Her hands are out, unsure of where this conversation was heading. "He offered to pay for the dish he ruined, but I told him it was fine."

"Why did you do that? He should pay for it."

"Well he's-"

She stops, when over Kikara's shoulder, she sees Robert at the top of the stairs, his hands in his pockets. Kikara follows Mirasal's leveled stare.

He removes his right hand to give them an exaggerated wave, a huge smile on his face.

Kikara swiftly turns back to Mirasal, her eyes wide.

Mr. Dobson was seated in a rocking chair near the window, his gaze staring out to the unrelenting storm. Lightning flashes outside the window, momentarily coating his stressed features in stark white. Colin sat at his feet on the floor, hunched over his toy soldiers. His expression stoic, hands barely moving the small figurines.

The room was dark, the only light was coming from the window and a small lamp near the headboard of the bed where Mrs. Dobson sat upright, a book gripped in her hands. Her eyes are fixed on her husband, her mouth quivering slightly.

"I can't believe you lost that goddamn music box," she sneers, spittle shooting out her mouth. "What the Hell am I going to tell my grandmother?" The box traveled with her everywhere, its music a comfort in unfamiliar environments.

Mr. Dobson's jaw tightens, his left eye twitches. His rocking starts accelerating, the creaking of the chair increasing. His only response is a little sniff, barely audible among the rain hitting the window and growing creaking noise.

She gives a loud, repulsed "hmpf" sound, breathing heavily through

her nose. "Disgusting." She shakes her head, her eyes are bloodshot, crazed.

Colin remains silent, his head slowly lifting, eyes growing bigger when he sees a red balloon emblazoned with "Colin" in bold white letters floating leisurely across the other side of the room. A long white ribbon flowing from it.

His eyes follow it as it floats out the door to the room, now open.

Had it been open before?

He rises up, casting his eyes to each of his parents, neither of whom seemed to notice the sudden appearance of the bright crimson object. His mother still murmuring under her breath, his father's chair still creaking loudly.

The sounds from his room become distant as he follows it, reluctantly at first, as it makes its way down the hallway, seemingly invisible to the other guests. He watches as two women in the hall having an animated conversation are completely oblivious to it as it glides past them. He continues to follow, down the flight of stairs, taking small steps as it makes its way through the front entrance, the doors hanging wide open.

It floats down the pathway. Colin observes from the doorway, intrigued as the rain and wind have no effect on it. He wonders if he should even follow, but only briefly. He quickly makes the decision to run after it as it starts towards the back of the hotel.

He runs down the hillside, the wind causing the droplets of rain to sting his face. He suddenly slips on the wet grass and falls, taking a tumble, still keeping his eyes peeled for the balloon, now out of sight. His eyes comb the area, sitting on his rump, flicking his soaked bangs out of his face.

But then, *there it is*. Suspended just beyond a large bush just by the grotto. Its string obscured by the large shrub. He approaches, the sound of the rain hitting the surface of the water grows louder as he gets closer.

The cave that had so frightened him when he first laid eyes on it, now beckoning him, like some magnetic pull gripping his legs, drawing him nearer. Then...

Then he sees the balloon. But not just the balloon no, it's...a clown. A clown in a gray costume, accented with red poms poms, his large white gloved hand holding the balloon's dainty string.

A clown, standing in the pouring rain, holding a balloon with his name on it. The clown himself seemed bone dry. Before Colin can comprehend the oddness of the situation, the clown suddenly gives a little wave and speaks.

"Hiya, Colin, I'm Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Would you like a balloon?" he giggles, his blue eyes are like the color of the clearest ocean water, seemingly illuminated as he crouches down. "Your parents aren't too much fun right now are they?" His buck teeth are displayed as he smiles, watching Colin's face shift to one of moroseness.

"No, sir, they're not." Colin keeps his head hanging down, Pennywise places his index finger under the boy's chin. "Let's get your spirits up."

Colin then hears what sounds like waves crashing coming from the blackness of the cave, as well as people laughing and carnival music. An almost- yellow light starts to appear along the inner wall of the entrance, like fingers splayed out along the rock. Inside the sound of the crowd of people grows louder, more rambunctious.

Pennywise throws an arm up, the bells of his suit jingling. "A circus by the beach! How's that sound? A beach, a circus and a balloon!" he holds the string out for the boy to take. "Here!"

Colin grins. "Great!" He snatches the balloon.

It chuckles to itself. This one isn't too smart.

"Alright then! We've got hot dogs and cotton candy and popcorn! Let's go!" He motions for him to walk to the cave, which Colin does, without question. It's a clown after all. They are about fun and games. No threat of monsters lurking. As he runs to the entrance,

there was indeed a beach scene, the sunshine was warm and lighting up the sky as seagulls circled above a circus, complete with rides, game booths and food stands. As well as groups of people gathered around, enjoying the festivities.

"Oh, wow!" Colin runs to one booth, decorated with gaudy images of clown faces and red letters. "I want some cotton candy."

A man wearing a red vest and white dress shirt with a skimmer hat holds out a cone, filled with fluffy pink goodness. "Here, ol' Samuel has got you covered." he grins wide.

Colin snatches it from the man's hands. "Thanks!"

Colin grimaces as he bites it. "Ugh!" he spits, tiny bugs flutter to the ground. "Ew! Gross! Bugs!" He puts his hand to his chest as he continues to evict any last bits out his mouth. He wipes the saliva from his lips as he looks at the cone. It's crawling with the strange red and black insects.

He drops it, horrified, whirling around as he hears laughter. The cotton candy man is still grinning. His mouth stretching further up his face near his eyes. Until his whole mouth seemed to be near the top of his eyebrows. Colin starts walking backwards, his eyes fixed on the man. He keeps backing up until he bumps into someone, feeling the brush of silk against his neck. He looks up.

It's the clown, only not. His face, it was different. The soft blue eyes have been replaced with bright golden-yellow. Colin jumps back, looking about the area.

Everything was levitating as the sky begins to darken, swallowing the sun, going out like a dying light bulb; the booths, the people, the rides begin to levitate. The food and game stands languidly break apart as they begin to rise higher. Except the one man, Samuel. He stayed, his creepy grin now turning into a gaping hole. A loud buzzing fills the air, as any traces of the light is now gone and the cave now an ordinary cave. The unpleasant sound is coming from the mouth of the man as dozens, if not hundreds of insects come shooting out.

Colin runs as they swarm him, he swats at the bugs trying to make his way to the cave entrance. But it's gone, disappeared. He trips and falls at the clown's black and white boots with a skid. The clown's corneas now glowing brighter, his face contorting into grotesque needle-like teeth, protruding from his red-rimmed mouth. At that moment, everything Colin was terrified of, everything he feared, was looking down at him, salivating. The secretions of this-whatever it is-dropping on his cheeks.

"We all float in here Colin!" Samuel cackles as the boy screams, attempting to dig his nails into the dirt as Pennywise pulls him by the ankles farther into the blackness of the cave. The sound of the clown's maniacal laughter bouncing off the cavern walls.

7. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

"Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides."

— André Malraux

Within the cave on the dank, moldy ground, It sat tearing the last remains of the flesh off the leg of the boy. Flanked by the bones and possessions of Its latest array of victims. The stale air starting to reek of fresh blood. The taste of his flesh deeply satisfying as the meat had been salted properly. The boy's fear of cave monsters and the insects had made manifesting these fears easy. Far easier than it had been before in the past. Little effort in the hunt is what It prefers now, Its meals are easier when the prey comes to It. Not many children at the moment, but It will take what It can get.

Its thoughts become occupied by the Thyceanian woman. She does not trust It. It can sense her apprehension, her reluctance. The anxiety she exudes. She does not suspect what It is, but there are other reasons. She does not trust It, but she will. She will. There's a pause as Its mind thinks of her luscious form, stepping out of the water, the image imprinted on Its conscious, the way her eyes looked at It, her delicate mouth when she smiled. It had taken in her intoxicating scent, a combination of the grotto water and a faint, almost fruity aroma. Perhaps perfume. It had been so distracted by her presence, It had almost dropped Its facade.

She would be a challenge, this one.

It growls softly, and resumes tearing into the bloody leg of the boy.

Mirasal sat in the lobby with her arms folded, staring at the maroon carpet under her feet. Her eyes tracing along the thin delicate gold thread etched into its surface. Robert had said he'd meet her back here after he "takes care of something."

But so far, he's late. She didn't have all day. Kikara was already a little annoyed that she was going off again. But it was only an hour.

Just an hour. Nothing more. An hour in which she isn't being yelled at or hurried or pushed. Maybe a part of her was happy to escape from that world for a spell. Perhaps that is why she agreed to do this. Her time at the hotel was no longer a relaxation, but rather a task, a stressful one. Since her military job already fills that role, she had no desire to experience it here. No, this was supposed to be a vacation. Her time with Robert was less strenuous. Shirking work was not in her nature, but *this wasn't even her damn job*.

She stood up and started slowly pacing back and forth along the floor, in front of the rows of crystals and paintings. She stopped and stared at one artwork in particular, taking in the deep rich colors. It was one her grandfather had done of a Thycenian woman with her baby in her pouch, seated on a rock in front of a lush forest. The model had been his younger sister with her young.

Mirasal stood, her eyes transfixed on the details of the painting. There's usually something new you can see. Little details that you don't notice on first glance that make up the constituent of the work. And now she saw something she hadn't noticed before. She edged closer; a yellow pair of eyes peeking out at her near the woman's feet behind a small bush, tucked away. So inconspicuous she wondered what his motive was for adding it. Her eyes narrowed as she came closer, her face right next to the image. She lifts a finger to gently touch it.

Seeing a shadow movement out the corner of her eye, she turns her head, looking off to the side where there's a very tall, older human man -or perhaps passing- with a white beard standing at the end of the other half of the lobby. Just outside the entrance. The hall lights from above highlight his dark green suit, a pipe perched in his mouth. He watches her for a second, puffs of smoke billowing around him, before he leisurely walks away, stepping out of view behind the wall. A trail of thin vapor follows him. She remains gazing at the area where he'd been standing.

She winces as a hand clapped her shoulder. She turns to see Robert.

"You're a little jumpy, aren't you?" An amused smirk pulls at the corners of his lips. "Didn't mean to scare you." His arms are draped behind his back, rocking on the heels of his shoes.

She didn't like a lot of downtime for this reason. Her job kept her alert, the barrage of stimuli kept her disciplined and focused. She tended to become idle when not on duty. She enjoyed quiet time, but it isn't necessarily good for her. She tends to startle easily when her mind is allowed to wonder.

"You didn't really." She straightens her dress. Although his habit of popping out of nowhere is a little jarring.

"What were you staring at?" he asks, craning his neck to look in the direction where'd she'd seen the strange older man. Nothing but a circular spot of light in his place.

"Nothing really. I just tend to do that." she gives a brief nervous laugh. He smiles, giving an implied head tilt.

"Yes, I do that too, sometimes."

An awkward silence falls over them as she clears her throat. "So..." She fidgets with her ear with her flesh hand, running her fingertip along the smooth polished silver of her earring. "Did you bring it?"

He produces a book from behind. "Here," he gives her a pleased smile. "I remembered."

"Good." she breaks out in a smile herself, reaching out for it. However, he pulls it away, just shy of her hand touching it.

"...Can I have it?" She reaches for it again, he pulls it back once more.

"Say 'please.'" He gives her a cheeky grin, clearly enjoying himself.

She stares at him, eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement. "What are you doing? Give it." She sticks her palm out.

He does that boyish pout again. "Just say 'please' that's all," He dangles it in front of her, holding it at its corner.

"But why?" She sternly folds her arms.

"It's just good manners."

"Manners?" she scoffs. "You talk about manners when you're always staring? How about throwing paper balls at me?" She looks away, arms still folded. She loathed being watched. It was disconcerting and in her experience meant things that weren't good.

He pouts again, looking like a child being scolded. "Touché."

Her head shoots back to him. "Wait...to-what?"

His pout dissolves into a more serious look. "You don't like me staring at you?" He returns the book to behind his back, moving in towards her. He still gives off that sweet scent, becoming a little stronger as he got closer. She stood her ground, biting the side of her lip, keeping her eyes on the wall across from them. She took in a sharp breath before replying.

"No, I mean it's a little uncomfortable," she gradually turned her eyes to face him. "You do stare. You know that right?"

He purses his lips. "Yes, I guess I do. But..." he tilts his head down, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath on her cheek.

"I was just watching you, admiring your beauty, that's all. I told you, you are very distracting." His voice is lower, almost a whisper. He keeps his face near hers, her own feeling warmer by the moment. That familiar throbbing starts in her head. She swallows the lump forming in her throat as he lifts those slender fingers up again. His thumb twitches faintly as he barely brushes her lip. She quickly dashes away.

"We better get started, " her voice is now resolute. "So can I have the book pacero?" she puts her hand out. "We really need to get going if we are going to do this. I have to help Kikara."

He's still slanted over, his hand is immobilized mid-air, looking crestfallen.

"What's 'pacero'?"

"It means 'please,' that's what you wanted right? Now can we get started?"

He then stands upright, handing the book over, his fingers brushing over hers once more. "Yes, we should I suppose," his voice is a defeated tone. "Shall we go to my room again?"

She holds the book to her chest, shaking her head, looking either way of the lobby.

"No, I'm thinking the patio. Nobody is there now." The back one was encased in glass, which would shield them from the rain and give them a view of the grotto. Although with this weather the beauty of it certainly wouldn't be present. But she figured, she should show him around the place.

Well that, and it wasn't his room. She couldn't handle the smell in there again.

"I have to know you're serious about this," she tells him as they start to walk, side by side down the corridor. "And not just messing about. I don't want to waste my time. If you're not genuine..." she looks up at him, his expression is indiscernible.

A moment passes, she can hear his breath, somewhat raspy, before he responds, "I want to learn. I was just trying to lighten the mood. Since you get so nervous." He peers down at her.

They came to a halt in front of large glass double doors, he reaches down, his massive hand clasping the left door handle, swinging it open.

"Well..." she replies, sauntering onto the floor and switching the lights on. "You don't need to do that though...I said I'm fine after a while, I just-."

"You don't trust me." he interrupts, a flash of dejection across his features.

"What makes you say that?"

"I pick up on things." he replies, taking a seat at one of the small tables that are spread throughout the area. An elegant white piano sat in the corner, the only standout the room. The suit he was sporting almost making him blend into the similarly-colored decor of

the area, the deep red of the handkerchief in his left breast pocket vivid in the bleakness.

"Well, we just met. You can't expect me to trust you right away." she argues.

"But you're not really giving me a chance."

"I am. Is this not me giving you a chance? I'm here, aren't I?" she stares down at him, her head shaking slightly. "What more do you want?"

"You're acting like there's something about me you don't trust." he grumbles, not meeting her gaze.

She remains standing, regarding him a moment, before propping the book down in front of him. "It's not you—I just don't trust anyone."

She takes the seat across from him, finding where she'd left off previously, the page neatly folded down. Come to think of it, she probably didn't completely trust Kikara. She has after all, only known her a few short years. Anyone outside her immediate family and few childhood friends would have a hard time earning her faith in them. Certain life experiences have made her cautious.

He doesn't respond. Instead he watches as she runs her finger down the page, finding the exact paragraph. His hands are on the table, twiddling his fingers. His full lips pressed together.

It hadn't been her intention to offend him. She was just being honest.

"Did I upset you?" Her eyes look up at him, trying to read his expression. She had a habit of not realizing when she's made somebody upset or angry, or slighted someone.

Slowly, he raises his hand, placing his palm on the side of the white and black centerpiece. He slides it over, reaching his long arms across, he takes her hands in his. Kneading the knuckles of her flesh hand, his eyes have that same warmth as before back in his room. "No," he continues massaging her fingers. "You can trust me, you know."

She gives no verbal response, only a quick nod. She tries to tear her attention away from his hands grasping hers and focus on the pages before her. She loosens his grip, pulling away gently.

"Why do you do that?" he asks, returning his hands to his side of the table.

"Do what?"

"You look away. When I look in your eyes." he inclines his head curiously.

"Oh, that," she shrugs off the question. "Just...eye contact...I'm not good with it. It usually gets me into trouble," Happy to leave it at that, she turns the book around to face him. "This is—"

"Touching too..." he adds. "You flinch when I touch you." He rubs his chin, crinkling his brows deep, a clear request for further information.

"I...just don't like being touched that's all." she exhales, a little worn down from his prodding.

"Well, that just means you're shy." he offers.

"No," she says firmly. "It's not just that, it's a lot more than that. As I said before. But...I'm feeling comfortable around you, but it's just..." she wiggles her hands. "You're very...touching.' You touch me a lot."

"I'm just trying to put you at ease."

"That's not really the way..."

"We'll get to know each other, like I said. It's just it feels like you don't want to be around me. Like I'm repelling you," he looks morose, before it turns to a broad grin. "I thought maybe I just smell bad."

"No," she laughs. His scent was strong, but certainly not offensive. "Your scent is interesting."

"Interesting is usually code for something else."

"Code? No. Your smell is different that's all."

"Different? Like...how?"

"Just not something I've ever smelled before." She tries to conceal a smile wanting to show itself.

Robert opens the flaps of his coat. "Maybe it's this new cologne? They say it attracts the opposite sex...or the same." he snorts the last few words, trying to hold in his giggling.

She frowns. "I'm not attracted. Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"The...flirting. Whatever it is. It's distracting for me."

He lets his lapels drop back to his sides. "It is?"

"I don't know how to respond to it."

Robert sighs, his lips turning into a pout again. "I'll stop. I'm just lightening the mood, like I said."

"It's fine. I already told you I'm alright with you. I'm comfortable-enough anyway. It's just talking isn't my strong point. I didn't talk for the first five years of my life. I'm just not a talker, more of a thinker."

"Look..." he says. "It's alright really. I was just curious. I don't think you have anything wrong with you...just a little 'social awkwardness' as they say," he shrugs nonchalantly, looking out the window. "Nothing I don't have too. I mean, I tend to let my mind wonder. Sometimes my conscious feels like it's elsewhere," he chortles. "Like on a different plane sometimes." He makes a dipping motion with his hand for emphasis.

She silently listens, chin resting on the heel of her palm. She hadn't noticed, other than his staring. He seemed pretty normal, but she can certainly fool people too.

"And it just means...you're gifted. Your mind works differently. You think in ways many don't." He gives her a inviting smile.

She blushes, her hand dropping, resting it back on the tabletop. "Some wouldn't see it that way."

"Well, fuck them, huh?" he smirks, as the room falls quiet, save for the low rumbling of the storm outside and the pattering of the raindrops on glass.

"Well," he breaks the silence. "Guess we should get started?"

"Yes." she places her hands on the book, turning it back to her. "I think we left off here..."

He sits back, fingering the small cigar stuffed in his breast pocket, obscured by his scarf.

"You can if you want." She motions at it. Smokers tend to need their 'fix' as they call it and she didn't want to deny him that. Even if she found the smell unbearable.

"It's fine. I know you hate it," he smiles, rubbing his fingertip along his jaw before he leans over the table. "Um, if I get something right, do I get a kiss?" His face breaks out in a mischievous grin, that twinkle manifests in his eyes again.

"No." she says bluntly.

"Aw."

She cocks her head. "I thought you-"

"Alright, alright, I'll stop."

8. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

"I feel a thrill of excitement at this first tiny glimpse of self-revelation, of intimacy."

— J.P. Delaney, *The Girl Before*

The rain was surging down outside, pummeling against the glass panels of the exterior of the patio. The wind is picking up, colliding with the windows, the long branches of the trees outside in a violent dance with each other. Every now and then, the lights flicker, a warning of a possible outage.

Mirasal and Robert sat at the small table, their hour almost up. The lesson had gone smoothly, at least he seemed to be taking it seriously. His slight lisp made his pronunciation of certain words a challenge, but it was clear to her he has a knack for learning the language. It seems like he doesn't really need her.

He also had a predilection for whining.

"What is it?" Robert queries.

"It's just you seem to be very good at this. I'm not sure you need me to help you."

"No I do. I...do learn languages fairly easily, but I do need some help. Someone who knows what they're doing."

"What makes you think I do?" she chuckles.

"Well you are particular, like I said. If I get something wrong, you'll correct me," he leans in, brows arching. "No coddling, right?"

She stares at him for a moment, fingertips tapping the book cover. "Yes, I suppose so."

A hush wraps around them as they sit listening to the rain.

"Well, um, you did very good," She perks up, giving him a congratulatory smile. She closes the book shut after carefully folding down the corner of the page. They'll resume tomorrow. "I have to go though," She begins to rise up, sliding the book along the table to him. "Tomorrow, same time."

"Wait a moment," he stops her with a hand on her wrist. "Don't run off just yet. Can we talk a little? I know you said talking isn't your strong point, but can you maybe indulge me?"

"About what?" She tilts her head, as the light in the room flutters briefly again.

"Just...I want to know about you."

She remains standing, his hand still holding her arm. "I...really should get back." She glances over at the double doors, fully expecting to see Kikara burst through them at any given moment.

"Why? You've already said you don't actually work here." he releases her wrist. "You can take a little off time. Come on." He nods at her chair, his tendrils of hair fall over his eyes. His hand comes up to flip it back.

"I know, but I promised," she shakes her head slowly, eyes closed. "She gets a little...ornery if I don't help." Her eyes shoot up to the ceiling as the lights flicker again.

"Well, I'll tell her it was my idea to keep you here," he gives a sly smile. "She can't do anything to me, now can she? Just sit, please?" he urges, giving her an expectant look, nodding in the direction of her seat again.

"Come *on*." he continues as she remains standing in place.

She relents, quickly pulling her chair back up, its legs making a loud unpleasant scraping noise along the ceramic tiles. She plants her arms on the table. "I don't know what you want to know?"

"Just anything," He places his large hands fairly close to her own, a slight tremor going through them. "Just tell me anything. I already know your family owns this place. But what else can you tell me?"

She puts her metal finger to her mouth, tapping her bottom lip, contemplating where to even begin. Such personal questions are usually considered rude in her culture. You don't ask someone outright if they have a mate, or about their parents or family in general. It was too intrusive. But he's new here, he'll learn eventually. Until then, she didn't see the harm.

"Why don't we start with this," he points at her prosthetic arm. "Tell me about that."

"This?" she glances down at the metallic limb.

"Yes. How'd that happen?"

"I was born this way, actually. My arm wasn't fully formed," she places her flesh hand on the metal chilled by the temperature in the room. "It's a birth defect," she fidgets in her chair. "I get some pains in it sometimes," she added, almost inaudibly. "This is the one the military issued me when I joined, it's supposed to be their most advanced model." She quickly tucks her hands under the table, tapping her foot.

"So, you're a soldier?" He perks up, eyes widening as he curls his spindly fingers around the chair's arm rests and inches it closer to the table.

"Yes, a pilot. I fly the ship. I also decode the images of the battlegrounds," she adds. "Out in the field, I mostly keep watch. I keep an eye out for any suspicious movements or objects. Basically, I'm responsible for the other soldiers lives. And the lives of civilians."

"So you use guns?" he queries as leans his head closer.

Mirasal sits back, letting out a little laugh. "Yes, I am trained in combat but I rarely see it. They initially wanted me working in the hospital, or somewhere that was...less intense. But that didn't appeal to me."

She casts her gaze out to the depths of the gloom that envelopes them. "I do like to beat people up and shoot things though." she giggles, the remark clearly meant in jest, but this shifts his demeanor

"So you've killed people?" His eyes blink larger.

She observes him a moment, lips pulled inward, pupils on the centerpiece of the table. It's a bit of a strange question, one she certainly hasn't been asked before. Yes, she had, there have been more than a few casualties. Self-defense. Loss of life is to be expected in her line of work.

Exhaling through her nose, she finally gives an answer, but one that's more of a rough estimate. "I'd say maybe...six-or so. Around that," she surmises. It's really only a guess. It's possible there are more. She tilts forward. "I don't really keep count."

Suddenly it starts again, a mild throbbing through her head. Her eyes become azure slits as she stares at him.

"What?" he asks, fingering the edges of his sleeve.

"Nothing." she shrugs, looking away, drumming her fingertips along the tabletop.

He sits back, kneading the fingers of his right hand together, clearly taking in the information she'd just given him. She decides to take this moment of him being taciturn as an opportunity to change the subject. Certain aspects of her work couldn't be discussed as it's a violation of protocol. Easing the conversation into something else, she decides, to turn the tables, so to speak.

"So what about you?" she asks. "Tell me about you," she folds her hands together in front of her. "Tell me something. Anything."

"Me?" Her question clearly catches him off-guard. "Well..." he taps his fingers. "I..." his hand reaches up to scratch his forehead lightly. "I've just arrived here."

"From where?" She was certain he was not human. No, just human-passing. His scent, his height, and his mannerisms were decidedly inhuman. She was hoping he would offer some hint, some morsel of information. Her own inquisitiveness has been stirred.

He sits back, his face reflecting solemnness. "From Earth..." his voice low, his mouth trembling. "I am not native to there, no, but I lived

there...quite a long time."

"Not human though..." she interjects.

He smiles. "How do you know?"

"Your scent. I told you it's nothing I've ever smelled before." Humans have a certain odor, a smell easily recognizable. His was unique.

"No, I'm not. But I lived among them for a very long time."

"I've never been to Eartho." she says, bringing both her hands up to rest her chin on her knuckles. She'd heard stories, tales passed down by her ancestors about the ancient humans who used to worship them as Gods and Goddesses.

"So what's your profession? What do you do?" She sensed the subject of his time on Earth was a sensitive one, since information wasn't forthcoming with any ease.

"Antiques dealer," he replies, the skin of his rigid exterior shedding. "I collect vintage items that nobody wants anymore. I sell them."

Mirasal's face lights up. "Antiquated items? Can I see them?"

He reaches over to place his hand on hers. "Of course. You can come back to my room if you want. I have quite a few small items with me."

He gives her good hand a gentle squeeze. She gradually wraps her fingers around his before she smiles back. She was more welcoming of the touch this time. "I can later on. You know that's an antique." she points at the piano in the corner.

It had been brought in by a human composer, who'd used it for practice. He'd gave it to the hotel upon checking out as a parting gift. "A human musician," she says. "He donated it, saying we shouldn't be without a pano."

"You mean piano." Robert corrects, smirking.

She stands, approaching it. "Pi-aNO." She runs her metal hand along

the milky frame. He follows her, standing by her side.

"I've been practicing, at least when I can." Granted, she doesn't have much time to do so. Sitting on its matching bench, she starts to churn out what can best be described as an assault on the ears. Robert winces.

"Clearly, not very often."

"Oh? I suppose you can do better?" she sniffs, feigning offense.

"Actually..." He sits down next to her, sliding his long legs under, cracking his knuckles before launching into a lively song. Playing it like a virtuoso, his thin fingers dancing along the keys. He pauses, giving her a grin, with a wiggle of his brows.

"You don't have to be so smug about it." she scowls.

His grin falters. "Who's being smug?"

"You."

"Here." He grips her wrists, gliding her fingers along the keys with his in unison. The music filling the air around them seems to lighten up the murkiness enfolding the glass room.

"I recognize this song." she says, starting to giggle.

"It's Jerry Lee Lewis," Robert replies. "He was big on Earth."

The playing becomes so fevered that their hands are bouncing off of the keyboard. Both are laughing, rocking along to the music. Mirasal stops when she notices he's now paused, watching her, his palms still holding hers, a faint sound of what sounds like purring emitting from the hollow of his chest.

The patio doors flying open and slamming against the walls shatter the moment and Kikara runs in, her eyes widened with panic.

"The Dobson's boy is missing," her chest is heaving somewhat, voice fractured as she sputtered. "I've been all over this crouhole looking for you!" she spreads her hands out. "What are you doing?" She

directs a glower in Robert's direction, who returns the look in an unspoken challenge.

Mirasal quickly draws her hands back from his, casting glances at both him and Kikara. "I was just—"

"Come now!" Kikara pulls her by the arm, yanking her off the bench and is speedily escorting her out the double doors, sending another stink eye at Robert.

It stays seated, Its hands balling tightly into fists. The lights flash, briefly flooding the room in darkness, forming shadows along Its face, Its eyes a red-rimmed inferno.

"What do you mean their son is gone?" Mirasal is hurrying behind Kikara, almost knocking into her when she stops abruptly in her tracks.

"I needed you and you're off playing around with that pano?" Kikara berates, hands on hips.

"It's actually pia- "

"He is missing. The Dobson's son is missing," Kikara breaks in, her head frantically scaling around the room. "There were some guests who spotted him going down the third floor stairs, but after that, nothing."

"Have you checked outside?" Mirasal asks, looking out a nearby window. "Maybe he's out there?" A disturbing thought intruded into her mind; the cave proved a curiosity for little ones.

"We looked. Me, Tomah, Teora, Radaha. Plus with the storm and all," Kikara dismissed. "I can't imagine why the boy would go out in that," she gestures at the window. "It's mad."

Tarros storms were brutal, and anyone familiar with the climate of the planet would know staying indoors was wise. But this is humans, in strange territory. Such caution would be thrown out the window. Such was there nature it seems.

"The grotto though..." Mirasal cranes her neck for a better view out the window, but it was obstructed by a column.

"No, the Dobsons already said he was afraid of it." Kikara replies.

"So was I, and that didn't stop me." Mirasal counters. The adrenaline rush of exploring the unknown was always appealing-at least to her.

Kikara leans in, speaking in a hushed tone. "They don't even seem that worried. It's bizarre," she gives Mirasal's arm a gentle tap. "She was more upset over the music box."

Kikara suddenly gasps loudly, causing Mirasal's body to jump slightly, drawing inquisitive glances from passerby. "You think..." she tilts her head closer to Mirasal. "He...went over?" she turns back to the people staring at them, flicking her fingers. "Nothing to see here."

It was a possibility. The hotel's mountain location meant steep ridges, some near the building's entrance. Such a thing would be a first for the Terog. They had close calls, but nobody ever went over the edge.

"No, I don't know. I hope not." Mirasal shakes her head, folding her arms.

"Oh,facala!" Kikara exclaims as the lights went out completely.

"So, we're thinking the brat went over?" Radaha inquires as Kikara gives her shoulder a smack, a sour look developing.

"Ow. What?" Radaha jerks back from the attack, the brown spots peppered along her forehead distort as she frowns, the two caramel feathers poking out atop her head flutter.

Everyone goes about setting up small battery-powered lights around the kitchen and throughout the hotel, distributing them to the guests, many of whom voiced their displeasure with the situation and reassurances were given. The hotel kept them on hand in case of outages,and since they were shrouded in darkness, at least for now, the lights provided relief. The only issue being there may not be enough replacement batteries for each should they die out.

"Pacero, be respectful. Something terrible could have happened to this boy." Kikara chides as she places a small light on the counter, switching it on. Tomah gives a morose head shake.

"He seemed like a nice kid. I didn't spend any time with him, but from what I saw, running out in a storm doesn't seem like something he'd do. He was afraid of bugs."

Radaha perks up at that revelation. "Bugs? Really? Human children must be very sheltered," she tries to avoid the dirty look Kikara is giving her as she continues. "We know they are not the smartest species. Present company notwithstanding."

She adjusts the marigold cap on her head, eyeing Gabriel Leon, a human immigrant who had become friendly with the staff. He was a beefy man with tan skin, black hair and a beard sprinkled with thin streaks of gray. His family owned a large business that specialized in the trade and manufacture of weapons. He'd come to Tarros to set up another branch of the company and often stayed at the hotel when not home.

He gives a little hand wave. "Yeah, um, no offense taken," he turns to Kikara, who has moved closer to him. "So, this boy's parents-"

"They don't seem too worried," she replies, flinching slightly at the bolt of lightning splitting across the sky outside the room's only circular window, causing a small sphere of pale blue to flash along the floor. "Maybe he's hiding somewhere in the hotel."

Gabriel concurs. "Hide and seek, kids play it all the time, right? I'm sure he'll turn up."

"I don't know...something's...not right," Kikara discreetly moves her hand over Gabriel's, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Hopefully, we can get the power back on, if the storm passes over us." There were no weather reports about an approaching storm, no warning. It had come on mysteriously out of nowhere. Even for the planet's volatile climate, it was strange.

Radaha steps to the center of the kitchen, brushing remaining food crumbs from her white and blue striped apron. "Remember that one

kid? Her parents insisted on another room just for playing, but didn't want to pay for it. Like the kid was going to die from mistreatment if she didn't get her way."

Kikara gives an annoyed sigh. "Rad, not now-"

"I'm just saying these people come here and act entitled. Then they let their spoiled brats run amok," Radaha insists. "Let them take responsibility. They weren't watching, now that boy is probably-"

"Stop," Kikara brings a silencing hand up. "Just stop. It's like Gabe said. He's probably just playing a game."

Radaha, taking a light in her hand, rummages through the cupboard, taking out numerous tall glass bottles, pointing the light at the label of each before she finds the one she's after. "I'm just being realistic. Somebody has to consider other possibilities," she strolls over to the counter and starts pouring herself a glass. "I think you should too."

"I am. I'm just being optimistic." Kikara starts to argue as Mirasal stands off to the side, pondering. Kikara's voice becomes distant, dreamlike. Her spine is resting against the red and white-tiled wall near the kitchen's entrance. Her prosthetic cradling her flesh elbow as it rests against her torso, her thumb to her mouth. If the boy didn't show, she'd have to inform her grandmother. It may escalate from there; if he truly did go off the cliffs, there would possibly be legal action against the hotel. But she was hoping that the boy really was hiding away somewhere. With the power out, finding him would be a task. Amazing that the kid wasn't frightened enough to show himself in all of the chaos of the outage, since children generally are afraid of the dark. Which leads her to believe the worst may have happened.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a tapping on her upper right arm.

It's Robert, reaching in through the door. He motions with his finger for her to come out. She sends a quick glimpse at the group, all huddled together in murmured conversation, and slips out the door.

Kikara, noticing the movement in her periphery, scowls.

9. Chapter 8

Chapter 8

"Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires."

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

A clap of thunder rattles the building as Mirasal softly shuts the kitchen door behind her. Scooping up a light on a nearby stand, she holds it up to Robert, the yellow-white luminescence creating strange dark patterns along his strong features, emphasizing his sunken eyes, making his face appear almost skeletal.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, signaling towards the kitchen. "I can't really talk now."

"You said you wanted to see my antiques," he replies, reaching down to take her by her hand. "Come on."

She stays in place as he tries to escort her away, stopping to glance back at her when she doesn't budge. "Not now. We have a crisis here, I'm not sure I should leave."

He lets her hand go, it falls limply to her side. "What, the missing boy? He's probably hiding somewhere. You know how kids are. Usually hiding from their parents, putting their hands where they shouldn't." he pauses, his eyes blank, pupils going askew.

"Yes, I know how they..." A long beat passes. "Um, Robert?" Mirasal gently shakes his arm, eyebrows drawn in a concerned furrow. "Are you alright?"

He shakes his head rapidly, looking down at her, giving a quick smile. "I'm fine. I was just...thinking. My mind has a tendency to...wonder."

She certainly understands that. "No need to explain. Do you have children? You speak like you have experience."

His expression sours into a mild scowl as he once again goes mute.

His bottom lip is shifting as he stares off. "I did. They...died-"

Just then, the kitchen door bursts open and Kikara stood, hand up to shield her eyes from the light Mirasal has turned on her.

"Put that face thing down, you're blinding me." Kikara snaps before her eyes settle on Robert.

"Chiamo Gray, isn't this a nice surprise," she places her hands atop her hips. "I see you're trying to steal my friend away again. Another 'lesson' I presume?" She steps closer, sticking her chin out "Well forget it. She's needed here. So maybe you should go find someone else to 'teach' you, huh?"

Mirasal gapes at Kikara. "Don't talk to him like that. He's a guest." She looks to Robert in an attempt to gauge his reaction. "Susa," she pleads. "We're all really stressed-"

"Oh, crousa!" Kikara spits at her before speaking at her through thought.

Don't speak for me. He can get someone else. You know he's just trying to bed you.

The psychic intrusion causes a streak of numb pain through Mirasal's head. She brings her metal hand up to her forehead as Kikara throws a disgusted look at him.

"I saw the way you were leering at her earlier. *She* may have problems seeing that stuff, but I *know* what you are doing," she points a finger at him. "You don't fool me--"

"Kikara what the iado? Why are you saying that? Stop it!" Mirasal grips Kikara by the shoulder. "Stop! Now!"

Robert suddenly steps forward, leaning his upper torso forward towards Kikara. "And what do you think your married lover is doing with you? You think he loves you? He's been with others. His wife even knows about it," his voice grows rasping, his eyes narrowing, he peers down closer, only inches from her face. "And he's hardly your first, either, right?" he smirks. "There have been many others. One would struggle to keep count."

An awkward silence lingers over them as Mirasal stares at him, mouth open slightly. Her eyes then switch to Kikara; whose bottom lip is trembling as she folds her arms, suddenly finding her feet engrossing. Moving quickly, Mirasal takes Kikara by the hand.

"Let's go," she directs her through the kitchen door, looking over her shoulder at Robert. "Maybe later."

As they disappear inside, Robert's hand starts to contort, shifting and cracking into a long black twisted claw. The claps of thunder drown out the loud scraping of his talons ripping down the wall.

"How could you embarrass me like that?" Mirasal demands as she releases Kikara's hand, almost shoving it away in disgust.

"You?" Whatever shock Kikara was in over Robert's comments evaporated as she turned on Mirasal.

"*How* could you just stand there and let that man talk to me that way?!" her eyes are wide, giving an exaggerated arm-flailing. "You just stood there!" she pats her chest. "You are supposed to be my friend!"

Mirasal slams the light down on the kitchen counter, its glow flutters in response, the beam flashing streaks off the pots and pans hanging along the walls.

"You were antagonizing him! What was I supposed to say? You insulted him!" she pauses. "And *me!* What the *faca* was that!"

"Oh, come now! You know he's just trying to sleep with you! You just can't see it!"

Mirasal looks at her through squinted eyes, shaking her head. "Do you realize how *insulting* that is? Saying I can't see things? That was humiliating, you saying that in front of him." She could feel her face growing warmer, her hands forming into fists.

Kikara puts her palms up. "I didn't mean it like that...I just..." she peters out as she looks around at the spectators, all of whom are trying to distract themselves with small tasks around the counter,

each one sending peeks in the direction of the two women.

Teora, on the other hand, has a vague look of amusement on her face as she sits perched on a stool, spinning it back and forth with her hand on the window sill. An almost-grin on her mouth.

Kikara lets out a loud exhale. "I don't think he's going to...respect that you're..." she stops, letting the words hang in the air, remaining suspended until she lets loose another exhale. "It's just that you're-"

"That I'm what," Mirasal comes closer. "Say it." Her azure eyes penetrating through her friend. Kikara shrinks back from her.

"That you're...different. That's all. It's just I know you have trouble with...seeing people's intentions. That's all. I just don't think you see what he's doing."

Mirasal gives her a stunned look, eyes blinking wider. "What?" She shakes her head, turning her back and giving a snort of derision, her metal hand coming up to shade her eyes as she studied the floor.

This is what she thought of her. A child who needs to be scolded. Condescended to. Dismissed.

This is insulting.

Kikara approaches her, arms out "It's just I think you're being...a little naive. I ...know you have those issues-"

Mirasal repeatedly turns away as Kikara moves to face her. "Stop. Stop talking. I think you've said enough," Mirasal says as she approaches the doorway, before turning back around. "I don't have issues *seeing* anything. And you don't need to worry about him. I'm sure you scared him off. Somebody who is actually interested in talking to me and you go and scare him off."

"*Why* would you want to talk to him now? Look what he said to me! Unless you agree with him..." Kikara argues, as her arms start animatedly flailing around again. "Of course you do! Given how judgmental you are."

Mirasal points at her chest. "I'm judgmental? And why do you think

that?"

"Don't think I don't know that look you gave me earlier. You think I took that stupid music box!" Kikara's intonation is rising, becoming hoarse. The stone cold silence that follows suit causes her to flare up.

"See!" she jabs a finger in Mirasal's direction. "You do! You never give me a chance. You just assume the worst of me."

"That isn't true," Mirasal dismisses. It's just-"

"Look, just leave," Kikara waves her hands at her, looking away in disgust. "Leave now. Go be with him, if that's what you'd rather be doing."

"I don't. I just want you to-"

Kikara cuts her off. "Now. Go entertain him then," she gives Mirasal a side glance. "Given your family's history, I shouldn't be too surprised."

Kikara is not nearly quick enough to evade the stinging slap dealt to her by Mirasal's flesh hand as the onlookers draw in sharp gasps. She stumbles slightly, her palm to the now-burning cheek. Her mouth starts to curl downward at the edges, eyes beginning to water. She hunches down as her ears pin back as she shakily stares up at Mirasal.

Mirasal's lips are pinched together, pupils steely, breathing audibly and heavily through her nostrils. She remains staring down at Kikara for a brief moment, hand still raised.

Lowering it, she turns and stalks out the door, slamming it as she exits. The impact causing a decorative framed picture to drop to the floor.

Gabriel rushes over to Kikara, who collapses in his arms sobbing.

It was seething. It had wanted to kill that woman. But It couldn't as there were witnesses. No. Instead It sees, in the hall upstairs, a red-haired human woman. Its anger is simmering, boiling over. It needs an outlet.

Heather Taggart exited room forty-three, giving her short flame-red hair an indignant flip.

How fucking dare they! Those idiots!

How dare they say she needs to rewrite even one draft. Her editor clearly isn't smart enough to get what she was conveying.

Such a moron.

And now the damn lights are off, before she could tell her editor to stuff it.

The woman is in the midst of her vitriolic inner monologue, when It cups Its claw over her mouth, dragging her back into her room, the carpet furling under her heels as she's violently pulled in.

It slashes her throat as she struggles, long press-on fingernails tearing at Its sleeve, trying to pry It loose from her as she screams into Its arm. Her jugular starts shooting off red spurts, spraying the walls and floor. It snaps her neck to finish her off. It then consumes most her body, Its initial motivation of relieving frustration had turned to hunger upon smelling the blood, spurring Its appetite. Leaving only the torso, It stuffs her remains under her bed. The only evidence of the attack is large crimson spots soaking deep within the red and gold fabric of the carpet and the splatters across the pale pink wall.

Mirasal lay on her bed, forearms stuffed under her pillow. Piercing gaze glaring at the ceiling. Kikara's words repeat through her mind on an endless loop. She'd plugged her radio into a portable power charger-one she'd altered so the socket would fit the antiquated design of the radio's plug-and she was grateful she had, since music was often soothing in stressful times. The charger, however, would last only so long before it died out, leaving her with no outlet, since it was too dark to do her carvings. Soon a familiar favorite song begins as she laments that fact.

'Well, the bellhop's tears keep flowin,'and the desk clerk's dressed in black, well, they've been so long on Lonely Street, well, they'll never, they'll never get back, and they'll be so, where they'll be so lonely baby, well, they're so

lonely, they'll be so lonely, they could die.'

She groaned into the air. Even Elvis couldn't improve her mood now.

Naive. That's what she thought of her. Someone not to be trusted to make her own decisions.

Guess she shouldn't be too surprised. Looking back now, there were signs; Kikara being overly praising of her completing the smallest tasks. It got to the point where Mirasal had to tell her that was a little condescending. It had been minor, but they had just met, and Mirasal assumed she just wasn't used to her 'oddities' yet.

But it seems her lack of complete faith in Kikara hadn't been mere paranoia on her part. She sniffled, wiping her flesh palm along her face. She couldn't even respond to Kikara's accusation of judgment. She'd put her in an awkward position before, one that she was still feeling the ramifications of.

Mirasal sits on the second floor hall, twirling a strand of hair. Kikara suddenly emerges from the room of one of the hotel's most prominent guests.

Or the most pompous. Mirasal couldn't decide.

She was certain the woman was a fraud, as many can claim they are of noble blood with no proof to back it up. So passing as a member of royalty was easy. The woman had a enormous dark blue diamond she showed off to others, staff or otherwise. Diamonds were popular and a sign of wealth on Earth.

Kikara pauses, glancing either way, her irises eventually coming to a stop on Mirasal.

"Oh, buna," she's slipping something in her pocket. "I'm just delivering some towels."

She nods repeatedly as she strolls down the hallway, sending a forced smile back at her friend. Mirasal, still twirling her hair, eyebrows together as she watches her exit; she'd delivered the towels already.

When the Duchess later ran out of her room, screaming hysterically

about the ring and theft, it really hadn't taken long for Mirasal to put two and two together, Kikara eventually copped to it, begged Mirasal not to reveal the truth and promised never to do it again. The revelation that the ring was a fake only added to her embarrassment. That was a year ago.

At the time, she'd believed her, and agreed to not say anything, even though doing so betrayed her grandparents, not reporting a dishonest employee. Being in the presence of them and knowing the truth was painful. She quietly ignored the subject when it was broached.

She doesn't know where the music box has vanished, but her reservations about Kikara's honesty had been justified. At any rate, they had more to worry about than that, between the outage and the missing boy.

Mirasal rolls over, facing the window, a strip of moonlight visible, cutting through the blackened clouds. The rain has subsided, hopefully for good. Better weather meant a better chance at finding the child. Alive or...no, she pushes that thought out of her mind. Too morbid.

She closes her eyes, her lids heavy and moist. Just as sleep is about to take her away from the day's stress, she sees something moving. She bolts up, knuckling her eyes with her good hand. It's only faint, a glimpse of something near the window; two small, yellow-orange tiny orbs.

She swipes up her light from her nightstand and aims it at the wall, creating grotesque misshapen shadows.

She catches her breath as she hears a small knock on her door. She crawls over the bed, still clutching the light, aiming it at the shadows, as if staving them off. They swiftly glide across the room with her movement.

She swings open the door; Robert, his eyes looking even more sunken in the bad lighting. Standing with a small worn-out chest in his large hands. "May I come in?"

She shrugs. "I suppose."

They stand facing each other as she looks to either side, arms crossed, toes fidgeting in her sandals.

"Are you a mentay, a mind-reader?" she asks out of the blue.

He doesn't respond, only looking at her, blinking a few times, his forehead wrinkles as he continues to stare at her.

"I know what that feels like," she continues. "I know that's what that throbbing in my head was earlier. You know, masare used to say I could feel a tiny pebble underneath a stack of cushions," she pauses, rocking, pushing her bottom lip out. "It's how you knew about Kikara, right?"

She'd suspected it earlier, the head throbbing. It was a sensation she was familiar with. She'd only ever encountered one, and she knew the feeling when they enter your mind. It's why she hated communicating patet, through thought, It usually caused a head pain. When Kikara sent that thought at her before, it had left her aching.

"Yes," he smiles. "You're a clever one."

"It's not cleverness. It's my senses," she sighs. "Some would disagree with that sentiment though."

"She's not your friend." He keeps his eyes locked on her as he walks to the bed and places the chest down. Mirasal takes the spot beside him as he opens it.

"Yes, well I see now, she has certain *ideas* about me."

He reaches in, pulling out a strange small doll with red face paint over cracked features. She smiles as she takes it from his hands.

"It's called a clown." he says.

10. Chapter 9

Chapter 9

"Love is a weakness which converts even the strongest minds as its slave and makes them sing its tune."

— Auliq Ice

"I don't know what you were expecting. I heard what you said to her," Radaha walks over to Kikara, holding out a cup of Narculli. "You basically called her a whore."

Kikara sits, dried paths of tears down her cheeks. "I didn't. I just-"

"You did," Radaha retorts, still offering the beverage. "Not to mention, everything else you said. Calling her dumb in so many words."

Kikara makes a declining hand gesture. "I didn't mean it that way." She wipes her face, sniffing. Gabriel gives her a comforting back rub, quickly retracting it when he sees the look Radaha is giving him.

"That was entertaining though." Teora cuts in.

Kikara sneers at her. "Oh, shut up, you're no help," before she continues. "I'm just worried. She just..wants to spend all her time with this man. And you haven't even seen him. He's....strange."

"So?" Radaha shrugs. "She likes him, clearly. And you know, we can be considered strange-to the humans anyway. Doesn't mean anything," she takes a sip of the offered drink herself. "I don't see the problem," She pulls a chair up to Kikara's side, lightly slapping her knee. "But clearly you do."

"Yes, I do. That man," Kikara wipes stray tears that are forming, dampening the dried tracks already present. "I saw him watching her earlier. It just seems like he wants to take advantage. And I think she's just really lonely. He's using this guise of wanting her to teach him. He's only wanting something. You know about her right?"

"Yes I know, and I know she can take care of herself," Radaha states

coolly, taking another sip. "She's a grown woman. And you're treating her like-"

"I'm not treating her like anything! I'm just trying to look out for her. Why am I being attacked?"

"Well she clearly doesn't *want it*," Radaha replies, saying the last few words more forcefully. "And nobody is a 'attacking' you. I just don't see why you're having such a hard time believing that maybe he just wants her to teach him? And maybe he genuinely enjoys her company? Have you thought about that?" she sits her cup down. "You don't even trust her to talk to anyone?"

"It's not just anyone. It's that man. I said I saw how he was looking at her. That's all. I don't think he'd be good for her," Kikara lets out a sigh, tapping her foot. "I just don't trust him." There was something about that man she didn't like. That look he'd given her, it was vaguely threatening. He has this menacing air about him. Something wasn't right with him. How he'd known about her was even more alarming. Of course, Mirasal *could've* told him, but that wasn't likely.

"Well," Teora begins through a yawn, arms stretched above her head. "What did he say to you anyhow? You said he insulted you...so," she lowers her arms, eyes anticipating. "Out with it."

Kikara glowers at the memory. "Never mind-"

"Faca! Come quick!" Tomah shouts through the kitchen entrance. Bewildered glances are exchanged before everyone runs out. There, Tomah stands, a light grasped in both hands, a look of horror as he shines it outside the door frame.

On the right are a set of claw marks, embedded deep within the wall, the pattern of the wallpaper slashed apart, strips dangling down.

"We got something loose in here," Tomah looks around at everyone. "And it's *big*."

Robert and Mirasal are seated on either side of the chest on her bed, examining the items inside. The lights placed around the room are

very slowly dimming, clearly in need of a battery change. She'd have to head downstairs to get some, which would mean most likely facing everyone. Given the humiliating scene earlier, she wasn't about to head down anytime soon.

"Don't worry about it, the lights. Don't worry." Robert says as he keeps his eyes on the box of junk. Just then they seem to brighten, almost as if rejuvenated somehow.

"Alright, I won't. They seem to be fine now," she says with more than a touch of puzzlement. She watches him a moment before she picks up the strange doll again. "So this is a clown?" She holds it up next to her head before lowering it to gaze at the crystal blue eyes. The porcelain tinged yellow, the painted smile cut-off by a fairly large crack down the cheek. The ruffles of its off-white outfit obscure its tiny neck.

"No. A clown," he holds back a snicker. "Clown. You've heard of those right?" He continues to smile as he rummages through the chest.

"I don't laugh at you when you get words wrong," It was her turn to pout, still staring at the doll's features, the pupils seeming to follow her when she turned it in her hands. The chest itself looked worn; holes and pieces warped away. "And no. I've never heard of these clowns." Seems a human custom, a strange one at that.

He reaches over to gently brush her mane off her shoulders. "I like your accent."

It was subtle. She'd been speaking Easna, the language of humans, fluently for some years now. But she occasionally struggled with certain words. His eyes lingered on her, hand still hovering near her shoulder. It was at this moment that she noticed how large they were; bigger than hers. And her kind generally had large hands and feet.

She smiles softly. "What's this?" She lifts up a small blue object with two lenses.

"It's called a 'view master,'" he gently takes it from her to turn it around. "You look in it. It displays different pictures. I acquired it on Earth. All these items," he spreads his hand out. "I got from Earth.

Just junk left piled in someone's home." he hands her back the view master. "Look in it."

She sees a series of strange, painted animals. Not anything she was familiar with.

"Oh, so it's like one of these?" she jumps over the bed to snatch up Kikara's heirloom off the desk. "I forgot to give it back to her," she turns it in her hands, a frown tugging at her lips. "She acted like such a *brat*."

She pauses and looks at Robert, whose watching her closely.

"When you said she's not my friend, did you see that in her mind?"

He gives a small nod in response, moving the chest aside to close the space between them, the mattress squeaks as he settles by her.

"You shouldn't have said those things to her..." she says, frown deepening.

"Well, she shouldn't have said those things to *you*." he counters, before adding. "And she's a thief."

"You know?"

Of course he would.

"Yes, and I know you didn't tell your grandparents. She doesn't deserve your protection. Why did you not say anything?"

Mirasal rubs her face with her good hand, drawing a deep inhale. "She needs the job. She would've been terminated. She has a family-younger siblings-to support after her masare died. And her fasare, I don't know about him, or where he is."

Robert listens, his gaze on the floor.

She shrugs, staring off, still turning the gold object in her hands. "Hearing what she thought of me. What she really thought. She pities me," she tosses the heirloom to the ground, it rolls, stopping near the dresser. One of its lenses cracking at the abuse. "I don't want to be

pitied."

"I don't pity you." He's beside her now, she tips her head, eyeing him skeptically.

"I don't. Why would I? I mean look at you. You're a soldier. You're a pilot. You're responsible for other's lives and safety. You do some interesting creations."

He stands up, walking over to her desk. "I saw this before, I'm not sure what this is...but it looks complicated." His eyes trail over the clutter of devices and tools.

"That stuff...is various projects," she moves to stand by him. "Things I work on. That I find on missions. Just junk really."

"See? I mean you are clearly very smart." He playfully gives her chin a light fist bump. She giggles, gently pushing his hand away.

"And this," he points to her ancient radio. "You really like that thing, huh?"

"Yes, I do. We can listen, since I have a charger plugged into it." she turns it on. "Some of the things I hear."

A male singer starts to warble over the airway. *'Put your head on my shoulder, hold me in your arms, baby. squeeze me oh so tight, show me that you love me too.'*

They exchange smiles as she adjusts the volume. Clandestinely, he brings his left hand up behind her to lightly brush it along her mane with his fingertips.

"That's Paul Anka," he says. "I notice you like that kind of music."

"Is that his name?" she asks turning to face him as he quickly retreats his fingers. "I couldn't find out what it was."

"I know a lot of the 'oldies' as it's called. Have you heard of the Big Bopper?"

She shakes her head. "I know of a Buddy Holly."

"They actually were killed together-in a crash. Along with another singer, Ritchie Valens. It was a famous incident on Earth."

"That's terrible." she says, wondering how many of the singers whose music she is so fond of are no longer around given how old the songs were. A little depressing to think about. Robert clearly senses this.

"Don't be sad about it. It was a long time ago."

They gaze at each other in silence for a moment, before she clears her throat. "So, you're a mentay. The things you must hear. Whatever people really think of you, you'd know it right away." If she'd possessed that ability, she would have known the truth about Kikara early on. How useful that would have been.

An unpleasant realization then comes on; it also meant he knew what she'd thought of him. Earlier in the day. What she *really* thought. All the negative feelings she'd felt towards him. He knew her displeasure in regards to the dish, but after that...

"Actually, I can just...detect emotions and memories, not so much read thoughts." he clarifies.

"Oh..." she hesitates. "What do you know about me? I know you've been reading my mind."

He rubs his ear with his finger. "You know, if you're not comfortable with me doing it..."

"It's fine," she urges. "It's alright." She switches off the radio.

"Your mother is a prostitute. The man you call father is not a blood relative. Have two sisters. You're a twin. You're a widow. You have two daughters," he stops, scratching his head, auburn hairs falling along his cheekbones. "You hate change...but I wouldn't need to read your mind to know that," he ends that last sentence with a slight smile. "I don't like change, either."

As he talked, her mouth fell open. At least it's all out there though, no explaining certain subjects. Uncomfortable ones. She chews her lip, bringing her hand up to run it down the side of her mane.

"And you do that when you're anxious." He points to her hand atop her head.

She looks at it before dropping it back to her side. "So when you asked me to tell you about myself earlier, you already knew certain things. Including this." she says, running her hand along the sheen of her metal shoulder.

"I did, but I just wanted to talk to you. For you to tell me about it yourself," he smiles again. "And you did want to run off on me earlier. And-" he pulls an exaggerated pout. "I'm *not* a whiner."

She gives a sheepish smile, obscuring her embarrassment in her hands. "I just...it's just you were complaining a lot." she replies as his fingers come up to pry her hands away from her face as his smile drops to a scowl-more playful than angry.

"Hey, I don't whine alright?" he insists.

"Alright." she gives him a unconvinced smile, before sighing. "You should have told me. But I usually know."

"You say it gives you a pain in your head when I do it?" he asks.

"Yes. The same thing happens when I communicate patet." she replies.

"What is that?"

"It's 'by thought.' It only gives a little ache, not as bad as mentay,"

"So you can communicate telepathically?"

"Yes...can you?"

He gives a single nod. "You think we could communicate?" He steps closer.

"I suppose it's possible." she says, not sure if it could work with another species. She then feels a minor pain shoot through her forehead.

Do you hear me?

Yes

So it works?

Yes, it does. She smiles wide.

Now we can speak, even when we are not in the same room, if you aren't too uncomfortable doing it.

I'm not.

There's a pause.

Do you want me to spend the night?

She looks away, giving a nervous laugh. "You should head back to your room and get some sleep. For tomorrow. There's a lot for you to learn."

He gently encircles a palm around her right wrist. "I'll behave. I promise."

"It's alright," she says. "It's just...you're just so forward."

"You don't like that?"

"Actually I do," she always appreciated directness. "It's just-"

"Do you want me to?" Still holding her arm, he pulls her to him, feeling the warmth of his body against the thin fabric of her dress. His other hand comes up to touch her cheek. Before she can say anything, he's lowering his thick lips down and brushing them against hers. She closes her eyes.

"But I already know the answer to that," he smiles against her mouth. "You do, don't you?"

A flutter starts in the pit of her stomach and her body is trembling. She brings her hands up to place them over his, giving a nod.

"Don't be nervous," he whispers as his mouth presses against hers. She

brings her right hand up to grip his neck, pulling him closer as her shaking ceases. His mouth had a sweet taste to it, tangy almost. The kiss becomes more rough as he coaxes her lips apart, growling softly. She brings her hands up to quickly unbutton his shirt, running them along his smooth chest, their heavy breathing growing louder. His own hands caress along the curves of her back, trying to find a way to free her from her own garb. Breaking the kiss, she unfastens her thick metal collar, letting it fall to the ground before reaching up to slide down her straps, when he stops her.

"I want to do that," he pulls down the straps, peeling her dress off, his eyes never breaking contact with hers. "I want to look at you." He slides his long fingers up along her ample hips, slender waist and taut stomach. He gives another growl as their lips meet again, snaking his arms around her, roughly tossing her onto the bed.

She continues helping him discard his clothing, pulling off his shirt and letting out her own faint growl as she struggled with the zipper to his trousers. Finally helping him shake them off and throwing them across the room.

She trails her fingertips along his lanky frame, hips and up his muscular torso, feeling the muscles of his abdomen quiver under her touch. Desire and curiosity meld across his visage as he went in for another fevered kiss, pushing her back onto the mattress. Eagerly climbing on top of her, he strokes her face.

A deeper, more guttural sound emits from the base of his throat as he runs his hand along her thigh. She wraps her legs around him, placing light kisses along his jawline. He tightens his grasp on her right thigh, pushing it up as he thrusts into her. His free hand grips the wooden headboard as it bumps against the wall

She buries her head into the crook of his neck, biting it, painfully digging her claws into his shoulder, the sensation of her metal nails piercing his skin causes his thrusting to become more violent. He grabs her wrists and pins them down, burrowing his face in her neck, his own claws protracting. His eyes start to flash, his groans are turning into snarls as strings of drool trickle down from his lips as the edges of his teeth become razor sharp.

He lets out a loud roar as they both fall over the edge. She tightly grips his hair and pulls him to her, pushing the back of her head against the pillow as she cries out, arching her back.

He collapses on top of her, still for a moment, trying to avoid looking at her as his teeth return to their usual appearance. He finally meets her gaze, staring down, her corneas like two pools of cerulean as he moves a stray moist hair away from her face. He brings his mouth in for a light kiss, keeping his forehead pressed against hers, their panting slowing down. She gently flips his dampened hair aside, before she pushes him onto his back. Resting on her side facing him, she has her hands tucked under the pillow. As their ragged breaths subside, he sees she's watching him, bringing a metallic finger up to trace it along his bottom lip.

He reaches over, pulling her to him. She nuzzles his neck, running her hand up his flushed chest, feeling a rumble form within it. She smiles as she rests her head against him, feeling it vibrate against her cheek, closing her eyes. Before long, he lowers his lips down for another kiss.

The light is now draining from the room as he climbs back on top of her. The two continue to explore each other's bodies, the moonlight reflecting off the sheen of sweat on his back.

11. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

"The best way of keeping a secret is to pretend there isn't one."

— Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

It lay beside her. Waiting. Waiting for her to fall asleep. As slumber finally takes her, It moved her arm aside and crept out of the bed. It went down the stairs, in the direction of the hotel's bar. Morning was approaching. It would have to settle for an adult, as there are no children out at this hour. A few more were now present at the hotel. Sure, It could creep into a room and take one. But the effort to do so would be somewhat time-consuming and It needed to return to the room. It had gained her trust somewhat, but Its absence upon waking might garner her suspicion. As the missing child had yet to be found, and as It knows, never will be. It had influenced the Dobsons, which took significant energy. Nobody noticed the absence of the two women It had killed, as they were human and are without any family or friends on this world. And the natives don't seem to concern themselves with their departure. As far as they know, the women could have checked out. The boy had been a delicacy, but with the influx of tourists, no doubt even more children.

It must garner more strength. It had been distracted. Too distracted to focus on Its task, which is to feed. But now Its hunger must be satiated.

It sees at the bar, a young human woman standing alone. The scent of her desperation was strong. This would be easy.

Its favored form was the clown, but here It had to have a new strategy. Robert Gray, antiques salesman, will have to suffice. It had taken the identity from a man decades before; a performer in the circus.

Esther stood at the bar, her hazel eyes inspecting the bottom of her bare shot glass. She should stop now, after all she'd had enough. But hey, she's just made the deal of her career and wanted to celebrate. She decided to order just one more.

As she did a man with auburn hair and wearing a silver suit came to

stand at the bar, a few feet away from her. They acknowledge each other with a subtle nod. The two continue to exchange glances before Esther slides her barstool closer along the black speckled marble counter.

"Hey," she smiles. "Uh...so you wanna drink? Bet I know what you want."

The man silently raises his eyebrows.

"I do. Trust me," Esther snaps her fingers at the gruff-looking bartender. "Two Rigas. Over here."

"So, you here on business or pleasure?" Esther inquires as the bartender sits their cocktails down. "Thank you my good sir." She gives him an appreciative smile, pulling on the hem of her short white cocktail dress.

"Business," the man replies, lifting his own glass. "And a little pleasure."

"Are you here alone, then?" Esther tries not to sound too eager. The man just nods slowly, smirking.

"So, what's your name?"

"Robert."

"Robert. Nice to meet you. I'm Esther. You know, like in the Bible," She sticks her hand out, wondering if they should be on a first-name only basis. "I notice the natives here don't do handshakes. Strange, huh?"

Robert accepts the gesture. "Not really. They are a different people. Unique from humans."

Esther gives a small laugh. "Yeah, I guess so. But, you know, I'd read this book by some Frenchman, Jacques Champlain and they didn't come across too well. Pretty violent. And more than a little arrogant if you ask me. Not to mention all the imperialism. I mean..." she tucks a thick ringlet of hair behind her ear as she moves in to whisper. "These guys seem like assholes to be honest. I was a little reluctant to

come here."

She steals a peek at the Thyceanian bartender, apprehensive as to whether he'd heard. Those big ears mean excellent hearing.

"That particular book was a misrepresentation." Robert offers tersely, the crescents of his fingernails rapping his glass.

"Well, I haven't read enough about them to know, I suppose," Esther replies, not sure how to respond to the man's shift in attitude. "You know the booze on this planet is pretty top-notch. I didn't think it would be. Been kinda drinking my meals."

She laughs, pausing a moment to give a suggestive bite of her lip as she extends a hand over, placing it over Robert's crotch. Sitting her glass atop the sleek steel-edged counter, she traces her soft fingertips up the flesh of his hand. "Wanna get out of here?" she whispers.

Robert wordlessly digs in his pocket, throwing a wad of crumpled-up bills on the counter.

"Keep the change."

Taking her by the hand, he heads towards the exit. The bartender observes them as they leave, repulsion altering the scar burned across his face, muttering to himself. "This place is just a mating ground for outworlders."

Outside, Robert releases her hand and makes his way around the building, back towards the hill leading to the grotto.

"Hey wait up!" Disappointment evident in Esther's tone as she watches him walk farther down.

She runs to catch up, almost knocking into him when he halts suddenly.

"Are you wanting to skinny dip? It's kinda cold for that isn't it? The rain could start up again. Hey, say something."

She's a little breathless. The small jog only emphasized how out of shape she was. Their faces are inches apart now as Esther reaches up

to roughly shove Robert against a tree. "Let's just..."

She grips Robert's face, kissing him. To her surprise, the man's lips didn't feel like they looked. He had a full, soft-looking mouth. Now they seemed to feel smaller, and a little wrinkly. She pulled back enough to focus on his face, still close enough that their breaths interlaced. She blinks her eyes open.

Her mother was looking at her.

Her *dead* mother.

Esther staggered back, her heart pounding, feeling like it could burst out of her chest. "Mother," she mutters under the duress of her heavy breathing. "Mother." She stumbled, her arms flailing behind to find some sort of support as her knees gave out. She collapses to the ground, unable to even speak.

"Essie, Essie, my baby look what you did to me," the older woman holds out her hands. "Look what you did. I taught you acting this way was a sin. A sin!" Her voice begins to grow deeper, raspier, malignant. Her eyes are lighting up a golden-yellow, like two tiny orbs in the dark. "You killed me! You killed your motherrrrr!"

As she leaps on the stunned young woman, her form begins to stretch, becoming more elongated, face paler, bright orange spreading through her gray hair. The last sight Esther ever sees is a pair of long, needle-like teeth coming at her.

Morning was leaking in through the windows as It crawls back into the bed. It had taken longer than intended, but Its powers were now becoming more stronger. It was able to influence the bartender and the patrons that had seen It and the woman leave. It slid under the blankets, draping Its arm over her. It took a moment to observe her sleeping. Tracing Its fingers along her features, her nose, the small hoop gauged through her left nostril, her mouth, studying the tattoo that started at the bottom lip and trailed along her chin and down her neck. A similar smaller pattern on her cheekbones. It then ran Its palm along the cold metal of her prosthetic. Having to wear such a device must cause discomfort. It could only imagine; as It could simply grow out a new limb. How unfortunate that

she couldn't. Its gaze moves back to her face. Her eyes are beautiful. Its a shame she must close them. Just as It finished that thought, she begins to stir.

Mirasal grunts as she gripped her prosthetic. She sat up, slouching, rubbing the area next to the metal shoulder of the limb.

"What's wrong?" Robert lifts his head off the pillow.

"I fell asleep with this on." she groans. Not that he didn't know.

He sits up, gazing at her arm, seeing his reflection in the glossy metal.

"Take it off." His eyes meet hers as she tightens her grip on the false limb.

"I will. When I take a bath."

"Why not right now? You said it's hurting."

"It's not that bad, really." she insists.

He starts to run his fingers along the metal shoulder, gently pulling at it.

"What are you doing?" She pulls her arm back, cupping it with her hand.

"Just take it off."

"No."

"Why?" he inches closer, his hand encircled around the area below the shoulder.

"I will when I bathe." She places her hand over his, prying his fingers loose.

"You don't want me to see you without it," he lets the sentence hover in the air before finishing. "I know that's it. But, just don't worry." He starts to try to maneuver it off, when she gives his hand an audible

slap.

"Stop it," she jerks away. "I'll take it off when I'm ready."

"*I want to see.*" he scowls at her, which she returns before turning her back to him.

"Why? It just looks ugly." She really didn't understand why he was so adamant about this. Why would he want to see it?

He runs his hand down her back. "You trust me now, don't you?"

"It really has nothing to do with trust," she turns to face him. "It's just I don't want you seeing it. You can understand that right?" she places her hand on his face, massaging his cheekbone with her thumb. "I just rather you not."

Throwing the covers aside, she stands up. "I'm going to go take a bath."

"It's early still."

"I have to be downstairs soon."

"Why? Just take a day off. Let them handle it," he says, pausing a second. "After what happened yesterday..."

"Yes, well, I can't avoid it."

She makes her way to the bathroom, the sunlight flooding in through the rectangular window just above the bathtub, the pink and white room vibrant and cheery. The shelves on either side of the tub held sponges and pastel soaps, each of a different scent and color.

She tries the light switch, relieved to see the power was back on. Turning on the water, she makes it a little cold to ease her pains. She pinned her mane up into a bun and grimaced as she removes her metal arm, sitting it on the sink with a loud 'clink.' She dips herself into the tub, one foot at a time, the water now fast rising to the rim, sinking down until her chin was touching the surface. Closing her eyes, she sighs happily as she listens to a pair of small birds perched on a branch just outside.

The door creaks, and Robert sticks his head in. "I wanted to see if you feel better."

"I do. I'll be out soon." she gestures for him to shut the door, however, he enters instead. He crouches by the tub, placing his large hands on the sides.

"Now let me see."

"No, don't..." She puts her hand to her stump. He gently moves it aside, putting his hand into the icy water, giving her a perplexed look.

"That's cold!" he grins.

"Yes. It helps with the pains," she squirms. "What are you doing though?"

"I just want to see, that's all. What, you think so little of me you think I'd be disgusted?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why?"

She couldn't give him an answer. Other than it just looks bad, but even then that wasn't the whole truth. Being without it made her vulnerable.

"I'm not going to *do* anything to you." He must have read her emotions.

"Well I know that. Do you honestly find it so baffling that I don't want to be seen without it on? Or that it's uncomfortable for me to have it off? Surely, you have things you aren't comfortable doing," she stretches, perching the heels of her feet on the edge of the tub. "You do, right?"

His eyebrow ridges come together, bottom lip is forming into that pout again. "Yes, I suppose I do." A stillness fills the room, as he seemingly continues to muse over her question. His eyes are frozen in place. She gives a head tilt as she studies him.

"Um, Robert?" she gives him a gentle nudge.

She continues to shake him, until his body suddenly jolts. "I'm alright. I was-"

"Overthinking maybe?" she suggests, rubbing his arm. He smiles in response, reaching into the water again, he touches her stump.

"Careful, it's still a little sore." She closes her eyes, bottom lip firmly between her teeth.

His eyes try to meet hers. "It's not ugly..." He crooks his finger under her chin, turning her to face him when she didn't respond. "It's not."

They exchange smiles as she feels the ache drain away. "Huh, feels good now."

She extends her arm behind her to grab a pink sponge off the shelf.

"Wash my back? I have trouble with it," she holds it out, urging him to take it. "There's some soap there."

He reaches up to grab a pastel blue soap, rubbing it along the sponge, his face conveying puzzlement as he watches the suds developing. She yelps as he runs it harshly down her shoulder blades.

"Ow!" she arches her back. "Softer...but only a little."

He slows his pace. "How's that?"

"That's good." She didn't like light, feathery touches. Rougher ones were always her preference. Bringing her knees up to her chest, she folds her good arm across and rests her chin on her forearm. She shut her eyes as he continues to scrub, stopping to trace his fingers along the vertical stripe pattern down her back.

She switches on the faucet, allowing hot water to bleed into the cold, effectively warming it up. "Why don't you get in?" she noticed he wasn't actually dressed. "It's warmer now."

He smiles. "Are you sure? Doesn't look like much room in there." He brushes his fingertips along the bubbly surface.

"There's room enough, but if you don't want to." she smirks, running the soap along her shoulders.

"No, I want to." His face erupts in a grin as he steps in, sitting carefully, as if worrying he could disturb her. She starts to lather him, but pauses.

"I can use a more, um, 'masculine-smelling' soap, if you like." A male human tourist had griped about the "too feminine" smell of the soaps, so she felt the need to inquire. Robert dismisses the suggestion.

"Nah, that's fine."

"You sure? Because a guest had-"

"I told you, I'm not like the other assholes here."

"Alright, just had to ask." she smiles as she begins to lather him. He closes his eyes, a wide smile stretching across his face, positioning his jaw upwards so she can wash his neck. Making little 'mhmm' sounds as she scrubs under his chin. She giggles at his reaction, although it made her wonder if he'd honestly never bathed before.

The sounds of their giggling drown out the barely audible knocking on the room's door outside.

"Mirasal?" Tomah knocks lightly with his knuckles. "You awake?" He waits, glancing around. When it looks like no answer is forthcoming, he saunters down the hallway, down the stairs, passing Candice Swain's room. He hadn't seen her for a day or two, at least. He opens the door timidly, as if he shouldn't enter it without warning, but he was certain she wasn't there. He stands assessing the area. Clean, bed made. Throwing open the closet door, he sees a rainbow of cocktail dresses.

Something wasn't right at the Terog.

"Did chiama Swain come back? Has anyone seen her" The kitchen doors flings open and Tomah practically runs in, as the sounds of guest's voices murmuring to each other are audible in the adjoining room, coupled with the metal clanks of pots and pans.

"Who?" Teora asks as she places a stack of plates on the counter, she looks to Radaha, who shakes her head.

"Candy. Candice Swain, in room thirty-two. She's not there but her clothes are. So she didn't check out."

"She's probably with a client." Kikara replies, arranging silverware in a drawer.

"It's been about a day though. I'm worried." Tomah sends his gaze out the kitchen door window, his head darting back and forth, trying to spot a glimpse of her blonde locks.

"Over what?"

"Something could've happened to her. You know, with the kid going missing and all."

Confusion leaks into Kikara's visage before she remembered. "Oh, yes. The Dobson boy. I wouldn't worry about it. She'll turn up, they both will... I'm sure. So did you?" She pauses, holding a bundle of forks pointed at him.

"Yes," Tomah, ripping his attention away from the dining room turns to her, his palms turned up. "I think we're on our own."

"Crousa." Kikara murmurs tightening her grip on the utensils, her lips scrunched together.

Teora slams down a pot. "Wonderful. We just lost the little help we had. Grazach Kikara." She does a small sarcastic bow.

"Me?" Kikara fumes. "What the faca did I do?"

"You fought with her. You created this situation. If you had just left it alone,"

"She was putting off work to go play around with that man. That strange man who-" Kikara argues.

Teora sharply cuts her off. "You're forgetting she doesn't actually work here. She didn't have to do it. And if she wanted some time

off... I mean we can't even *pay* someone to work at this crouhole!" She slams down another pot.

"She still promised to help out!" Kikara approaches Teora, ears back, a knife menacingly pointed at her. "You can't say you'll do something, *then not do it!*"

"And what do think you're going to do with that?" Teora nods at the blade, arms akimbo, her irises flaring. Kikara halts in her tracks, seemingly a little dumbfounded.

"Nothing. I-I wasn't going to-"

"You bet you're not," Teora folds her arms, huffing, her nose turning up. "You will have worse than a slap coming, I assure you." Her own ears are now pinned back.

"Ladies, calm down," Radaha steps in between, spreading her arms out. "This won't get us anywhere."

"I'm going to go and look for Candy." Tomah hesitates, as if in anticipation of a possible conflict, before deciding to bolt out the door.

"Just don't make any new friends!" Teora calls after him, gaze still glued to Kikara. "She clearly hates that."

"Faca idiot." Kikara's lip curls as she tosses the knife in a drawer.

Robert sits at the foot of the bed as Mirasal massages Its head with a towel. She then gets a comb and runs it through Its hair, smoothing over any stray strands.

"There," she holds up a small handheld mirror. "How's that?"

It nods and smiles. She was now dressed in a red ensemble, with yellow, white and black threads trimmed along the bodice and matching glove. It thinks of how beautiful she looks in the colors.

Mirasal then sits at the small vanity table, braiding small portions of her mane and leaving others flowing free, fastening the braids with

small silver clips. Washing it had been less of a task thanks to Robert. Sharing her bath had its perks. He was watching her, with his thumb and index finger on the bottom of his jaw. He strides over, combing his fingers through her mane. She stands up, draping her arm around his shoulders.

"I should head out now." she says quietly, smoothing over his hair again. It was still somewhat damp.

"Just stay," he pulls her closer, caressing the small of her back. "Stay here with me."

She gives him a small quick kiss on his snub nose. "Don't you have things you have to do?"

"Yes. But not until much later." he abruptly tosses her onto the bed, tickling her. She laughs and protests, trying to push him away, but her efforts were half-hearted at best. He stopped long enough to plant a kiss, she takes his round cheeks in her hands as he does.

"The rain has stopped, so let's have your lesson outside today." She could use some fresh air and the sunlight looked like it could be appearing more often throughout the day. She certainly wasn't in a hurry to face everyone.

"OK!" he grins, rolling off of her. He stays on the bed as she stands and heads over to the desk. She picks up a small, lustrous black radio. Much more sophisticated than her beat-up antique one. It was a way for her to hear any bulletins from the base as well as any news relating to her father. There were times when she dreaded turning it on, waiting for the day she would get some bad news.

"What's that?" Robert walks over to her, reaching around her arm to trace his fingertips along its silken surface.

"It's a scanner. It keeps me in touch with the base, in case of an emergency. And I can listen to any news."

"An emergency?"

"Yes. If there is one, I have to go in." She hoped not, as now she was enjoying her vacation. That and she hadn't gotten much rest, thanks

to the person standing next to her. Not that she was complaining.

"...Go in?" His eyebrow ridges crinkle.

"On duty." She fiddles with the device's small buttons, not noticing the dour look developing on his face.

"So, if they call you, you have to leave?" he frowns, snaking his arms around her waist. "And when you say emergency, like what?"

"An attack of some sort," she replies, turning her head to face him. "Usually that's why I get called in."

"Life-threatening?" He tightens his grip on her, hands slipping to her hips.

"Yes, there's that risk," Thinking about it never helped her. She found it best not to. "It's my job." she touches his cheek, giving it a little pat. "Don't worry! It's quiet now. Now, let's get a blanket and the book from your room."

She crosses over to the closet as he reluctantly lets go her hips. Removing a dark blue quilt from the top shelf, she turns to him. "Are you hungry by any chance?"

"Nah." he shakes his head. "Not now."

Melissa 'Viola' Cartier sat in a small cafe, smoking and sipping an odd nectar. Sweet-tasting. Whatever the ingredients she'd probably not be familiar with. Just like everything else on this world. She'd tried-unsuccessfully-to ask for directions to the Hotel Terog, but the non-English speaking locals had been less than helpful. It wasn't until she'd asked a Thycenian soldier she'd met on her trip that she'd gotten the route. Since he was military, English, or Easna as the natives called it, was a must for interacting with outworlders.

She was in Galivo, the largest capital of Tarros. Soon she'd head out to the Terog, just outside the city. Candy was already there and they'd last talked a week prior. Candy had been griping, business was slow, mainly due to the popularity of the Thycenian prostitutes. Many preferred them over the human escorts. For Viola, fraternizing with

another species wasn't something she deigned to do, but Candy was adventurous.

She had just tried to contact her and no response. Not like her to not answer. And for her to ignore it was a bad sign.

She rises up, with her drink and cigarette still in hand, she flipped back her short chestnut locks and straightened her green dress, patterned with circles linked into each other. She walks casually out the cafe door. Standing on the walkway, she can plainly see the Terog in the distance, atop a mountainside.

Just above it, large dark storm clouds hover.

12. Chapter 11

Chapter 11

"She and I are two unhappy ones who keep together and carry our burdens together, and in this way unhappiness is changed to joy, and the unbearable becomes bearable."

— Vincent van Gogh

Ellowyn O'Maille marched through the front doors of the Terog like she owned the place. She was tall, silver-haired and regal, the type that commands attention.

Her ebony heels clicked along the marble floor of the lobby with only a small black leather purse in her hand. And she'd brought a friend; a robot, a little over six feet in height, its body square-shaped, with a round clear head that resembled a plasma ball, situated with two black specks for eyes.

It followed close behind her, lugging a small brown suitcase in its hands. The droid occasionally paused to observe the onlookers, coupled with 'beep' sounds. The guests were all smiling and pointing at the droid as it followed Ellowyn, who would periodically stop to direct the bot forward. There were whispers as she walked in, as this was the famed roboticist, renowned for her groundbreaking work which had earned her tremendous respect for her innovation. The strange bot clearly one of her creations.

Behind her came in another woman in green. Getting lost among the people clamoring about the lobby entrance.

"Any sign of chiama Swain?" Teora asks Tomah, keeping her green eyes pinned to the older woman approaching the front desk. Tomah shook his head as he knuckled his eyes. He'd not gotten much sleep. "No, she hasn't turned up yet."

He folded his arms as he pondered. He remembers another woman who he thought had checked out named Veronica Dell. Her room was now occupied by the mysterious Gray. She'd presumably had left a

day or two earlier. Guests were not required to sign anything just to leave, they merely packed up and left. A confusing system with definite flaws. One that made it hard to keep track of everyone.

But still, he hadn't seen her actually leave. And she made it clear she'd be there a while at least. But she'd up and just vanished. Women in their line of work often disappear, so concern was certainly warranted.

Teora gawks at the bot as the older woman reaches the front desk. She nudges Tomah, who was staring off.

I don't know. It doesn't look so special to me. She spoke telepathically to her co-worker, not wanting to risk being heard. Tomah doesn't offer any response, only an uninterested shrug.

The design seems so simple. Thycenians don't believe in creating A.I. Cybernetic limbs, sure, that was different. But a full false being, it went against nature. There was going to be a robot convention nearby where humans and other species were putting their work on display, so this lady was probably one of the loons who will be there.

"Buna diwas." Teora perks up, giving the new guest a bright smile. The woman shoots her a steely look, her blue-gray eyes narrowing. Teora feels a sliver of ice trickle through her veins.

"O'Maille," the roboticist tersely says, gaze still on Teora. "And this is Richie." She nods to the droid, who beeps in response.

Kikara checks her in, leading the way to the room. The woman says nothing more as she brushes past, ascending the stairs behind Kikara. Her robotic servant follows, still clasping the suitcase, pausing on a step briefly to glance out over at the lobby and the crowd as they continue to point and laugh.

"Man, this place is great!" one man exclaims as he passes by a white-bearded older man in a green suit.

Teora and Tomah watch as Ellowyn and Kikara disappear with the bot in pursuit beyond the balcony.

"Well...she's not very friendly. Not that we aren't used to that." Teora

grimaced, as she pictures the woman's beady eyes boring through her, a small shudder accompanied the feeling. That woman and that droid were both strange.

"She's probably got a lot on her mind. Those creative types you know." Tomah says, nonchalant about the woman's laconic demeanor.

Teora shakes her head. "They come to *our* planet. Treat *us* like animals. Act *above* us, and you try to justify it."

Tomah waves her comment aside. "I'm not trying to justify anything. We are animals to them. We're not human Tee, and to them we're something alien-just like they're aliens to us. It will take some getting used to for them-as well as us."

"Crousa," Teora mutters as he walks away, saying nothing more, but she continues, "We deserve to be treated with respect. Why are we lesser than? What makes them so superior? We shouldn't have to wear a false human skin to be accepted." Being treated like creatures on display in a menagerie was insulting. They were a race of warriors, they shouldn't tolerate this nonsense.

Radaha's raspy voice can be heard, coming around the main stairwell, almost bumping into Tomah as she appears around the railing.

"Did I miss her? Did I?" she asks, wide-eyed, almost like a child with a new toy. "Tell me I didn't."

"...Who?" Teora lifts an eyebrow ridge.

"The roboticist!" Radaha exclaims. "Is she here? I heard she was going to be here at the Terog, because of the convention. And I was waiting for her to arrive, but kutta! Seems I missed her," she pauses for a second, surveying the area around her. "The only human I'd actually want to interact with."

"Wait-that awful woman with the robot?" Teora asks, gesturing upstairs.

Radaha stares her down, her hands dropping to her sides. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Teora shuffles past her. "Just...don't get too excited." she says as she makes her way to the desk to check in the woman in the bright green dress.

Such an outfit for this weather.

"Melissa Cartier," the woman says as drops a small round suitcase with pale blue floral print beside her legs sheathed in white knee-high boots. "Do you know a woman named Candy?"

Teora, peering down at the guestbook, sharply lifts her head up. "Candice Swain?"

"Yes, is she here?"

"No. We are unable to find her. Her clothes are still here though, and some of her things, if you want to collect them for her." Teora replies, trying to adopt a positive tinge to her voice. Something she struggled with when she felt things were looking grim.

"Come," Teora gestures for Melissa to follow her. "I'll take you to her room."

"So, here chiama O'Maille." Kikara spreads an arm towards the large bed, with its red and gold-tasseled trim. "We hope you find everything to your satisfaction."

ElLOWYN gave a polite smile as Kikara gives a little jump as the bot moves past her, promptly situating itself at the side of its owner, dropping the suitcase at the tip of its feet with a clunk.

"Not really used to that." Kikara murmurs, gaze still on the droid. Its black tiny eyes almost seemed to match those of its creator. Unsettling.

"Richie...takes getting used to." the woman offers, turning to her metal companion, who 'beeps' in response, its clear dome head containing quivering pulses of blue static. Its blank stare then returns its focus to Kikara. She shifts her feet, kneading her hands.

"I'm sure I will enjoy my stay." ElLOWYN says. "Thank you."

"My friend is a quarter robot in a way. She's got a pros-" Kikara begins as the roboticist gives a small flap of her hand. Kikara heeds the gesture.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. Buna." She swiftly makes her way out the room's door, which is promptly slammed shut just as she exits, almost catching her skirt.

Kikara starts down the hall. She stops and changes her route, gazing down the corridor for a moment before walking the other way until she reaches Mirasal's room. She stands in front of it, examining the room's number, lifting her shaky right hand to softly tap, her left one in a fist with the thumb rubbing the index finger. Her hand weakened with each movement, her stomach violently knotting, tightening as she continued.

No answer. No sounds in the room. No voices. Nothing.

Letting out an audible sigh, she brings her hand up to grip the knob. With a gingerly pause, she turns it. Sticking her head in, there is no sign of her friend. The room is quiet. The clenching in her stomach unraveling as she opens the door further and enters.

A gasp escapes her as her eyes immediately spot something gold and familiar on the floor near the dresser. She rushes over and dives down, grabbing it up. Just as she does, a piece of the broken lens drops to the floor. She grips it to her chest, wiping her nose as a sniffle comes on.

Bam!

She bolts up, spinning around in the direction of the windows.

What was that?

She approaches the direction where the sound came from. Near the desk is a black scanner. She recognized it as Mirasal's military one. It was now on its side on the floor, near the desk's chair, static emitting from its small speaker. She charily walked towards it, trying to hear the voice forming among the crackling and popping. Her ears perking up as she makes out the words as they reach her.

'Ba-ad F-f-frie-END, BA-aa-d FrI-EN-d'

"What..." she whispers, kneeling down closer. "Who-"

'You're a bad friend! You're a BAD FRIEND! YOU'RE A BAD FRIEND!' the voice hollers. A raspy, deep crackling voice embedded with malice.

She falls backwards, letting out a small cut-off shriek, her heirloom rolling out of her palm. She scoops it up as she stumbled to the door, throwing one last glance back as she slams it shut.

Outside the room she tries to catch her breath as she stares at the door. She hears a click behind her.

"You okay ma'am?" a kind-faced human male asks, peeking out through the crack of his door. She acknowledges his query, turning to face him.

"Yes. I'm fine. Grazach."

She almost stumbles down the hall, her heirloom in her grasp, the sounds of her rapid breaths trailing behind her.

"What does your name mean again?" Robert queries.

"To admire." Mirasal replies.

"That's fitting." he grins as he gazes at her, noticing she's staring at something.

"What are you looking at?"

She points. "There. The river is just below. Fasare used to take us fishing there. He worked as a fisherman for a while. We'd help him."

"Fisherman, huh?"

"It didn't really suit him-that life."

"Um, your father, what is he like? What's he do now?" His question is

met with an indifferent look, attention pointedly on the pages of the book open on her lap.

"You don't want to talk about him."

"No, I don't really." Does he really need her too? It's not like he can't find out on his own.

"Alright, have it your way," he puts his hands on his knees. "Let's take a little break. We've been going for a while now."

His long legs straighten in front of them, wrinkling the dark blue quilt they sat on near the edge of the waterfront, under a canopy of trees. The spot gave them a good view of the surrounding landscape. The texture of the grass was nice and dry and occasionally thin streams of sunlight sliced through the clouds to touch down on them.

"I thought you promised to be a good student?" she pretend-huffs, holding up the book of Terthach language. They had brought two out with them; the language one and another about Thycenian mythology.

"I am," he pouts. "Am I not being good? I just want a little bit of a break," he starts to finger her ears. "Come on. Let's relax a little." He then plucks the book out of her hands as she frowns.

"You're being obnoxious right now." she smirks as she takes the book back in her palms. He'd been whining a little throughout the lesson, fidgeting. She tries to suppress a smile as he wraps his arms around her, feeling his scowl heavy against her face.

"You haven't *seen* obnoxious. If I wanted to be obnoxious, I'd do *this*," She yelps as he tackles her, pushing her back onto the blanket, causing her to drop the book as she brought her arms up to block his hands. He lowered his head to her belly to deliver a raspberry against the thin material covering her midriff.

She laughs as he starts to tickle her, fighting him off playfully. His eyes then spot a large, majestic-looking flower, its supple outer petals a bold red, with a white center and a marigold stigma sprouting from the middle.

"What is it?" she touches her bottom lip with a metal finger as she follows his gaze.

"That," he crawls towards the blossom, reaching for its long stem, the thorns pricking his index finger, drawing droplets of blood which begin to trickle skyward. "Aw, fuck." he mutters under his breath, ducking his wound behind his back as Mirasal sits up, crawling towards him, the weight of her body against her palms as she tries to peek at his wound.

"You hurt yourself-" she reaches out, gesturing for him to show her.

"No!" he continues to conceal his hand. "No, just I-the thorns."

Its touch had caused the flower to start to wilt and brown, but to her, it still looks alive.

"What were you doing?" she asks, her voice tinted with concern. "You shouldn't just touch any plant or flower. There are some that are deadly. Venomous. You need to be careful. Those ones are not poisonous. You are fortunate."

"I just wanted to pick one for you." he nods at it, injured hand still concealed behind him.

"Why would I want a flower though?" she looks at him, blinking.

"You know as a gift. Don't you do that here? You know flowers are supposed to be romantic, right?"

"No, in our culture they symbolize spirits. Picking them is disrespectful. It's why they have thorns- to protect. Or venom," she sits up on her knees. "The ancient ones used to think the venom from the deadliest could bring the dead back to life," She'd seen a human couple exchanging them before, but giving them as a romantic gesture seems so strange. "These ones are called 'gama' it means 'strong' because they are able to withstand even the fiercest storm and still survive."

"Really?" Robert stares down the flower's swirl of red outer depths.

The white lilies sit in a plain lavender vase on a small stand. Alison

snatches them up with her diminutive hands. "You fucking asshole! You worthless piece of shit! How dare you do this to me!" She practically screeches the last word as she chucks the vase in the direction of the clown that stood near the only window.

"Fuck you! They want me for all of it!" Her fists are clenched, brown eyes now rimmed in a watery pink. The bars over the window outside are casting shadows along the entity's bored-looking face as he stands, back rested against the wall.

"You just ruined the lovely flowers your mother brought you, tsk, tsk." He gives her a sly smile as she cries out, storming at him, his enormous gloved hand cutting off her voice as he grabs her throat and growls.

"I have always encountered ones like you. Ones who were convinced they were somehow special. Could tame the 'monster.' But I am no mere monster. I am the Eater Of Worlds," He tightens his grip, her tongue starting from her mouth. She gags as she smells the rancid blood on his breath as he brings his pale face closer. "And you my dear, did some stupid shit." He boops her nose with his free hand as she struggles to loosen his grasp.

"You made it so easy. The desperation, I saw it in your puny little mind." He throws her to the ground, she lands with a thud on her back, propping herself up on her elbows to give him a weepy grimace. He stares down at her, his eyes now a yellow blaze.

"Desperate and pathetic parasite. Humans serve few purposes for me. But now, you will serve another," he kneels down, getting in her face again. "And when they pulled those kids out of the water, along with the wreckage, they knew who to blame. You were after all, the driver."

Alison screams. "You made me do it!"

Pennywise grins, straightening up to sneer down at her. "I made you do nothing. I didn't even have to influence you. You did it of your own free will."

Alison continues her wailing, as two orderlies stand just outside, peeking in through the thick glass of the diminutive window of the heavy iron door, seeing nothing but the petite brunette shrieking her head off again.

Her arms flailing wildly at the air around her. She'd been screaming constantly about a clown hiding in the sewers.

"Is that her?" one asks. Her co-worker nods, scratching at the stubble along his chin. "Yeah, that's the crazy bitch who drove the school bus off the cliff. She survived because she jumped out before it went off. They should really screen the drivers. The loonies really fall through the cracks."

They immediately run inside the room as Alison picks up a shard from the busted vase and slashes her calf open, using the blood to paint her lips and connect them in lines to her forehead.

"He looks like this." she says as the orderlies wrestle the glass from her hands.

"You alright?" Mirasal's voice snaps him back to the present.

"Yes," he smiles. "Are you sure you don't want a flower?" he slips his fingers into the inside of his vest, slowly presenting a massive long-stemmed bud, still closed up tightly. Before her eyes, the pink outer petals unfurl, revealing deep ruby inner petals and a radiating yellow center, like a tiny sun was placed within it.

"Oh," she breathes, her fingertip gingerly reaches for it, unable to take her eyes off the burning ball in the middle, softly flickering. "Another trick? How did you do that? Has it been there the whole time?"

"Can't reveal remember? Now, this is called a 'rose.' These ones are unique. Listen." He gently cups his hand around her neck, maneuvering her ear to the bloom. The faint, soft singing inside touches her eardrum.

"Is that?" she cradles it in her palms, pulling it closer, her ears pricked at the unexpected sounds. "Singing? I can hear singing." Beautiful, silky feminine voices like bells chiming, almost hypnotizing.

"They're the singing roses," Robert replies. "Some believe they can also heal. They are symbols of a goddess called Bessa. Praying to her brings you good fortune."

"I could use some of that. Where do they come from though? Where do they grow?" She manages to pry herself away from the enchanting siren song.

"A different world than this. There's a whole field of them as far as the eye can see. Their thorns can tear your skin off, but once you get them out of the dirt, they're safe." He places it in her hands.

"I'd love to see this field." She twirls the stem in her fingers, the color of the petals blurring together.

"Maybe I'll take you one day." he pulls her to his side as she places the rose carefully on the blanket.

"Would you?" She playfully pushes him onto his back, tickling him.

It begins to giggle, but stops itself. No, don't laugh. Robert's face contorts slightly, she stops and grips his torso.

"Susa, did I hurt you?" she retracts her metal hand quickly. "That usually happens...I try to be careful."

"No no," he pinches the bridge between his brows. "No. It's just I'm not," he looks up at her worried face. "Nothing. It's nothing." Before he could finish his thought, she stood up, her attention now elsewhere.

"No, don't get up..."

"Oh, look," She starts walking towards a large tree, towering, its thick arms stretching endlessly to the sky. Almost as if the clouds could touch the delicate leaves on its branches. This one dwarfed the others in comparison.

"This," she touches it. "This is The Weeping Tree." She cranes her neck to gaze upwards at it as Robert joins her by her side.

"What's that?" he asks, his eyes following hers to the top.

"It's a legend about how the grotto and trees formed here," she says. "It used to be pretty bare in this area, just the mountain and the grass, and a few plants here and there. Dhesda and her mate lived

here. She was a Thycenian woman who couldn't have children, even though they wanted them badly." She tries to remember the tale as her mother told it.

"So, one day, they planted a seed outside their home and it began to sprout. Over the next few years it grew into a tiny tree. And they cared for it, loved it like a child. It never got very big. Then one day, her mate went off to fight in a war and was killed."

This part of the story hit too close to home for her, but she continues, "She was so distraught she wept for days. She sat by the little tree and her tears fell onto the soil around it."

Robert's eyes grew bigger with anticipation. "Then what happened?" he asks.

"When she woke up the next day, the tree was huge. It had grown overnight into this," she points up. "Her tears had made it grow much larger. She continued to cry and the tears that flowed formed the grotto and all the plant life around it. So, out of death and sadness came life."

As she finished, Robert smiles. "Do you believe that?"

She replies with a slight shrug. Such tales were entertaining, but not to be taken as fact.

Robert rests his palm against the bark. "I have a story that's sort of similar in a way, just in terms of a woman wanting a child so badly she'd do anything."

"Let's hear it."

"A woman named Mia, she is a succubus, you know what that is?"

"Yes, I am aware of them. Demons, no?"

Robert nods and continues, "So, she is of the Prim-"

"The Prim?" Mirasal queries with a head tilt.

"It's like...an essence. Where various creatures exist, the dark ones,

and light ones. Different ones," he explains. "Now, she spent her time seducing men and killing them. But one day, when she came across a family raising a small boy, she desperately wanted a baby of her own. A man named Walter O' Dim promised her a child if she became mortal, to which she agreed. He uses a special machine to turn her mortal and says she'll have seven years with her child."

"Does she get her baby?"

"Just wait. Now, she needs a mortal woman to carry the child. She takes on the form of a male to impregnate a woman named Susannah with sperm she took from a man named Roland."

Mirasal's brows furrow at this. She'd heard odd tales, but this...was strange.

Robert smirks at her reaction before he carried on. "So she then possesses Susannah's body so she can carry the baby and birth it. Then when the time comes to deliver, she and Susannah are separated and Mia gives birth to a baby boy named Mordred. Upon birth his hunger is so great, however, he devours her."

Mirasal's mouth drops open. "Wait-what?"

"The baby devoured her after she gave birth." he replies.

"It ate her?" Her mouth was still agape.

"Yes, it had been so hungry..." he trails off.

Mirasal stands looking down, before finally, "That's a horrible story! I don't like it at all," she brushes past him, walking back to the blanket, throwing a look back at him. "And how is *that* the same?"

Robert hurries after her. As he removes his palm from the tree bark, it leaves a large brown spot, its edges inching outwards. "It's about a woman who wanted a child, and her death brought life. Her body was it's sustenance. Her flesh gave it life," he explains as he catches up to where she's standing. "It is the same, but different. Just like Dhesda's tears brought life. Mia gave life to Mordred. She created him."

She narrows her eyes as she gnaws her bottom lip. "I suppose so. But...still." Her culture had myths and tales that centered around death and dying, but nothing involving a woman being eaten by her young.

She glances up at the branches of the smaller tree they were near with the tagro fruit. She picks two plump ones off the branch, giving them a slight squeeze.

"Here, try." She holds one out to him, which is met with a resistant look.

He sniffs at it as he took it from her hand. "Oh, yes, I saw you with these before."

"What?"

"I mean I've heard of these before."

"Oh, well, they're famous." she says as she bites into hers. She enjoyed the sour taste when they are fresh off the branch. Many found it too intense, but she preferred them this way. She never liked them baked, drained of the bitter taste. Sour and crunchy foods were always her favorite. She pauses her chewing as she observes him turning it in his hands under his nostrils, sniffing it loudly.

She swallows, sitting back down on the quilt. "You can eat it. It's fine." He gives her a quick glance before reluctantly biting into it, pausing as he did so. The bite quickly meets the ground.

"Ugh!" his face contorts in a grimace as he runs to the water's edge to splash his tongue. He then stands up to face her. "How the Hell do you eat this?" He continues spitting, twisting his lips to either side.

She didn't think it was *that* bad. "It's not for everyone." she says dryly, chewing languidly, keeping her gaze on him as he continues to spit furiously. Bringing his fingers up to frantically attempt to wipe away the sourness from his taste buds.

She gawks at this gesture. "I like it though. I would think you'd be able to handle it. But maybe you'd prefer them in a pie? It's not as strong." she suggests as Robert shoots her a disgruntled look before

wiping his mouth off with his sleeve. He gives a little snuffle before he responds.

"Don't think so. I like..more saltier food. Meat."

Mirasal acknowledges this comment with a slow nod of her head as she chews. He lowers his lanky form to sit by her on the quilt.

"So," his arms supports him as he leans back, running his fingers under his nose as he sniffled again. "So, getting back to your father."

She pauses her eating, peering at him out of the corner of her eyes, keeping her head still. She swallowed her remaining bit of fruit with a small soft cough. "You need me to tell you? You can't just read my mind? Surely you know." she replies, giving her chest a pat. She hadn't felt the head throbbing, she assumed he wasn't digging around in her memories. She preferred it if he did, whatever kept her from having to explain things out loud. Talking about her problems wasn't something she excelled at.

"I do. But...I thought you didn't mind?"

"I don't really. It's just I don't understand why you ask me things you already know the answer to. You're aware I'm sure." she says as she swats a tiny stunebug off her skirt.

"I'm just making conversation, that's all. I just feel you are worrying about him."

"Yes, I told you the life of a fisherman didn't really suit him..." she petered out, pondering how to explain it. "So he went back to doing...more unsavory things."

At one point he'd been in the military, at a very young age, but the details of why that ended have never been revealed to her or her sisters. Of course they'd heard rumors...

"He's involved in...criminal activity?" Robert inches closer, putting the weight of his chest against her shoulder. She keeps her gaze fixed ahead.

"Yes, he is. He'd quit that life for a while, though. At least during the

early part of my childhood. But masare never hid it from us. What he did. Or what *she* did...at least when we got old enough to understand. But we figured *that* out on our own, really."

"That she's a prostitute?"

Mirasal scoffs softly. "Usually there's a different word being used." And she'd had it thrown at her and her mother often enough. Kikara's snide comment comes to mind. She had not used the word directly, but the implication was there.

"Your real father though..." Robert quirks an eyebrow at her, clearly wanting her to elaborate more.

"I know who he is-or was. He's no longer alive." Her voice stays flat.

"Did you know him?"

"I have very vivid memories of meeting him, when I was very little. Naseret doesn't remember, but I do." She recalls her true father's striking azure eyes, not unlike her own, the scar down his right cheekbone. Her eyes fleck to the silver of Robert's rings.

"How are the little ones?" Cyate kneels down by the twin girls, his armor making 'clink' sounds as he does. He hands them each a small piece of dark purple quartz from his last raid on the planet Drava. His smile displaying the silver caps on two of his front teeth.

"They're good," Arnamina replies. "Her arm though, and she's still not talking." she gestures at Mirasal's stump. The girl, examining her new treasure, glances up and beams.

"Eh, at least you can tell them apart." Cyate shrugs, flinching as Arnamina harshly swats his shoulder.

"Are you making jokes about this?" She scowls at him.

"What?! She'll be fine! So she'll have to struggle more than anyone else. So what? It will toughen her! It's like the story of the lame thyacoma. The wounded one has to be the strongest, and the most resourceful! She'll be fine. Just look at me," Arnamina shoots him a skeptical look as he pats Mirasal on the head and pulls Naseret onto his knee. "Both of them will do

fine."

"Do you see the man you call father often? I mean he did leave you..." Robert's touch makes her flinch slightly as her mind focuses again.

"He keeps his distance. Masare didn't really want him around," she sighs. "When I had my children, he left care baskets at the door for them. I don't think he can come around without putting us in danger. Growing up, there were always strange men coming to the house looking for him."

She stops, remembering what Robert had told her about his children. She wanted to ask him about it. How many did he have, how old were they, what were their names. But, she figured, it could be painful for him. Such a loss was great for somebody who seems so young. At least he *looks* young. She didn't know his age, or about his family, or really anything at all.

"Tell me about your family. Brothers? Sisters?" She deftly changes the subject.

He takes some time to ponder. "Brother," he finally replies. "Brother, father, mother, that's all."

It's clear no further details will be given. She traces her fingers along her prosthetic, pulling her lips in. "That's all, huh?"

"Um...yes," he continues. "Not much left of my kind. My race is dying out. My planet dying, left it long ago," he explains. "Not many left. Nothing to tell."

A grave mien rests on his features as he stares blankly at a tiny red bird as it teeters on a thin branch of a nearby shrub.

"Oh." she turns her half-eaten tagro around in her fingers. He's not the first one she's met whose planet had been destroyed, either by the self-sabotage of the people or other means.

Maybe it's best not to ask him about it. If he didn't want to talk about those things, she wouldn't force him. It's just it only seems fair, given how he insisted she tell him about herself. Already knew so much

about her from reading her memories.

"What?" He notices her eyes on him.

"Nothing," she replies. "I just wish I could read your mind, that's all."

She wants to know about It. It had carelessly mentioned Its offspring to her, but already that was too much. Keeping any background about itself ambiguous. The story of a dying planet and people were false. Such fabrications are needed. Nothing to be revealed. Revealing too much, saying too much would be dangerous. It must keep a low profile, so as to not draw attention to Itself. It wasn't sure, but It felt as if another could be here. It could sense a presence. Another watching. It thought of Its offspring again and the image of Ben Hanscom stomping the life from them comes on, causing a blossom of pain in Its being.

It twitches, Its eyes drifting lopsided. To Its horror, she notices this movement.

"Are you alright?" she asks as It turns away from her. It shakes Its head, Its eyes settling back as It turns to face her.

"I'm fine."

13. Chapter 12

Chapter 12

"I wonder if this is how people always get close: They heal each other's wounds; they repair the broken skin."

— Lauren Oliver, **Pandemonium**

"You didn't hear it. This ugly voice just came out." Kikara sits across from Gabriel at the pearl-white kitchen counter, her hands trembling. Gabriel extends his plump ones across to gather hers, but with a quick glimpse at Radaha, whose back is to them, he thinks better of it.

The kitchen is heavy with the sounds of glass clinking and the scent of fresh fish sizzling in the pan, which is today's menu once again. The blanket of steam in the room making it a little too warm, causing the red and white checkerboard wallpaper to sweat and wrinkle just above the stove.

Gabriel reaches up to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand. "Are you sure that's what you heard ? Those things can pick up random signals I think." he suggests as he sits back and folds his arms.

"No, it was not something random. It was addressing me, like it knew I was in there. Whoever-or whatever-it was. It felt like I was being watched." she replies as she runs her hand down her cheek, bringing it to a rest under her chin.

"What do you mean it knew you were there?" Radaha asks as she turns, hand on her hip and the spatula in the other. Her pastel blue and white-striped apron smudged in food stains and grease.

"Just, something or someone-I don't know!" Kikara throws her hands up, exasperated. "Maybe, maybe Mirasal was playing a joke."

"That's not something she'd do." Radaha argues, rolling her eyes. No, Mirasal's sense of humor was more on the dry side, she'd never

engage in malicious trickery. She can't say she'd spent too much time with her, but knew her well enough to know that's not her nature.

"Or Teora, maybe it was her somehow."

"You can't honestly think she would either." Teora is more about mocking you to your face, not being underhanded. She knew her well enough too. All of this was insane.

"I don't know. I don't know what to think. Maybe it's that man," Kikara suggests. "Maybe he's doing it." Yes, it had to be. There was most definitely something... *strange* about him. And given what that voice, that ugly hateful voice had said, it may very well be. Just remembering what it sounded like causes a fresh wave of trembling across her body.

"Kutta, you really have it in for him." Radaha says as she takes a seat on one of the black-topped stools at the counter, having finished her chores. Gabriel gives her a dubious look as she grabs the Narculli and pours it in a small glass.

Her remark earns a glare from Kikara. "I don't! But who else? Who else? "

She drops her head in her hands as Gabriel reaches over to give her a pat on her back. Unaware of what to make of the incident, he assures. "Look, just don't go in that room again until we figure it out, alright?"

Kikara lifts her head up. "You didn't hear it," she whispers, "I felt *threatened*."

Crash!

All three jump on their seats as a large glass bowl, seemingly out of nowhere, smashes to the ground, shattering, sending shards skidding across the floor. Silent glances of confusion are exchanged as Gabriel's wide-eyed expression meets Kikara's.

The rain was starting up again. A mere light drizzle as Mirasal and Robert made their way up the hill.

"I hope I didn't bore you with all that talk about ships and flying." she laughs, dawning on her that she didn't really let him speak the whole time.

"Not at all." he responds with a smile. He shields them with the blanket, holding it up over their heads. Mirasal ducks down closer to him, clutching the books and the rose to her chest. She no longer heard the singing emitting from its core, but its light reflected a gentle yellow across her neck.

The sunlight had been going in and out all morning, but now the sky was turning murky. The fresh air had agreed with her, but rainy weather always left her somewhat drained of energy.

"You're tired." he says as they enter the back entrance. He brings the quilt up to nestle it around her shoulders, the thick blue fabric contrasting with the vibrant red design of her outfit.

She looks beautiful in blue.

"Yes, the weather-and you didn't really let me sleep." she smiles wearily.

He brings his hands up to cup her face. "I may not let you sleep tonight either." He gives another wag of his brows, lowering his lips, just about to touch when the sound of someone's throat clearing causes them to pull apart.

Kikara is standing with her hand firmly on her hip, in the other she holds her heirloom, the lens dangling by a scant wire. Mirasal's face drops.

Oh no.

She nudges Robert away, slipping the blanket from around her shoulders. She wraps it around the books, topping it with the rose. "Can you take this back to the room, pacero? We need a moment."

Robert silently takes the bundle, speaking at her through thought.

You can talk with me here.

It's best we are alone. This is going to get ugly.

But-

Pacero...

Robert exhales heavily through his nose, the crescents under his eyes darkening as he casts a frosty glare at Kikara, ascending the staircase. She doesn't acknowledge his departure. Her glare remains fixed on Mirasal.

"Well," she begins as she lifts up her broken treasure, the lens being held by the fragile wire snapping loose and falling at her feet. "Grazach for fixing this. It angers me you had to go and break it *again* though-

"It was an accident-" Mirasal replies. Lying didn't come natural to her. Her mother always knew when she was fibbing, she could see it in her face, her mannerisms. Funny, Kikara proceeded to repeat the same sentiment her mother had always expressed.

"Araseza! You are such a terrible liar!"

"Look, just let me fix it-" Mirasal reaches her hand out to take it when Kikara jerks it back, holding it up over her shoulder.

"Don't touch it! And nice joke with the scanner. That was *real* funny! Bet you two got a laugh out of that." she spits, wagging her finger at the confused expression Mirasal is exhibiting.

"...What the faca are you talking about?"

"The *scanner!* The *voice!* That wasn't funny! It scared the iado out of me!"

Mirasal is now gape-mouthed. "*What* are you talking about? We weren't even in there!"

"The voice yelling at me over the scanner! You *know* what I'm talking about! Don't play stupid with me." she stops, suddenly freezing.

Poor choice of words.

Mirasal's eyes turn to slits. "Stupid, huh?" She roughly brushes past, starting up the stairs. "I don't know what you are talking about, but I'm not going to stay here and be accused of things I didn't do," she pauses. "It would have broken again anyway."

"If it wasn't you then who was it? That idiot Teora?" Kikara yells after her. She tightens her grip on her possession.

"She's always had it in for me," she mutters as she bends down to snatch up the rogue lens. She then storms off, still murmuring under breath, almost knocking into that same tall, older human male in the dark green pinstripe suit and stark white beard that Mirasal had seen before. His puzzled gaze meets hers as she offers an apology for her agitated friend.

"Susa." she says as she continues up the steps.

It waited in the hall near the room. Waited and watched the ensuing quarrel with a smirk. As It did, a slightly rotund man with a dark beard approaches It.

"You got a light?" Gabriel asks as he pulls a cigarette from his creamy shirt pocket.

Robert's back is against the wall, the bundle Mirasal had given him resting at his feet, the orb in the center of the rose pulsating like a strobe light. He shakes his head, his liquid gold irises meeting Gabriel's rich, dark brown ones.

Gabriel strokes his belly, as he fingers the unlit cigarette. "Awe, damn. You know it's hard to get this kind on this planet. The ones they have here just ain't the same." He then notes the man's appearance, giving him a once over.

This is the guy. Kikara had mentioned his eye color and hair in her description of him.

He notices the odd glowing flora at the man's feet. "Whoa, what the Hell is that?"

"Nothing, just something for the lady friend."

"Always some weird shit to find around these parts, I tell ya.' So...you and Mirasal have fun? How are the lessons going?" he asks with a hint of a mocking lilt.

"Oh, it's going very well. I'm learning a lot from her." Robert replies, tapping the sole of his glossy black dress shoe against the wall.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Gabriel chortles. "She's a bit of a handful though."

"What do you mean?"

"She's a bit fussy, ya' know," Gabriel lifts his hand to wiggle his fingers. "Gotta have things a certain way. Surely, you've noticed..."

"I've noticed she's particular about things," Robert squints his eyes. "Nothing wrong with that."

Gabriel rubs the back of his neck. "I suppose, if that's what you wanna call it. You know, I think she's great, I like her. She's a military pilot, which is interesting. You wouldn't think they'd let a retard into the army. Wouldn't happen where I come from, I can tell you that. But isn't that really something?" He returns his cigarette to his shirt pocket.

"But there were times when I first met her that she seemed like an automaton. Keeping to herself and always doing those little carvings. Where I come from that's called-" he pauses when he sees Robert's dark visage. He takes a step back as he glimpses a flicker in his pupils.

"Anyway, I-I just wanted to say-" he stammers, under the weight of the man's glower. "I just wanted to tell you it takes some getting used to-her behavior I mean."

Robert pushes himself away from the wall with his foot, arms folded across his chest.

"You know cigarettes aren't good for you," he reaches over and snatches the cigarette from Gabriel's pocket, throwing it to the ground. "Not when you have this," he gives a rough poke to Gabriel's stomach, a devious smirk forming. "Might want to be careful there," his left brow rises up as his voice deepens to a near-snarl. "Tell me,

does your pecker work even? Or should I ask Kikara?"

Gabriel's cheeks start sprouting red blotches as he spins on his heel and makes his way down the hallway, sending a quick scowl back as he descends the stairwell, his head of thick, glossy black hair disappearing beneath the floor.

Robert keeps his eyes on him, small fiery specks sparking in the center of his irises as a low growl vibrates in the thick hollow of his throat.

"She's yelling at me about a voice over the scanner. I have no idea what she's talking about."

Mirasal drops the rose in a crystal vase of water before she snatches the scanner up off the desk, turning the dials. "It may have picked up a stray signal, but I don't know how that's possible. Maybe I got an alert."

She turns to Robert, perched on the corner on the foot of the bed. "A voice?" he asks.

"She didn't give any details, just went on this rant saying we were playing a 'joke' on her," She stares off out the window at the rain softly trickling down against the glass panels.

"I think she's getting too stressed," she shoots a look at Robert as he snickers. "It's not funny. She was acting like a madwoman, like Hypadando himself has possessed her." If she even believed such a thing was possible.

"Who?"

"Hypadando, he's the God of chaos," she explains as she touches her metal hand to her forehead. "She came in here while we were out, she found her heirloom." She'd forgotten it was on the floor. A sick feeling writhed through her bones. She hadn't meant to intentionally break it, her frustration and anger at the moment had consumed her. But it wasn't a complete accident either.

Perhaps a part of her wanted to break it.

"But she took the opportunity to call me stupid again." Maybe her guilt was unnecessary. Her racing thoughts are quieted when she feels Robert's arms slide around her, pulling her to him.

"So did that fat ass." he mutters, a deep line forming above his nose ridge as he scowls, almost sneering.

"Who?"

"Gabriel. The one Kikara is..." He makes a loop with his right index finger and thumb, poking his left index rapidly through it. Mirasal stares at him a moment before realization dawns on what the obscene gesture meant.

"Oh," she smiles, giggling. "Yes, yes that's him."

"You knew they were." he quickly makes that same gesture again.

"Yes, that wasn't hard to figure out." she wearily sighs, crossing her arms. Kikara's disappearances during certain times of the day during the time Mirasal had been here, as well as the fact that Gabriel was hanging around so often. The giggling, far too long stares and touches made it painfully obvious. A little reckless in her opinion.

"Not that that's happening often." Robert snickers.

"What?"

"He's got a little issue in that area."

Mirasal's face bunches up. "Ugh, I don't need to know that." Gabriel's physical appeal had always been lost on her. She'd rather jump naked into the fiery lava of Mt. Rykali than touch him, but apparently Kikara could stomach it.

"He said you were-"

"I don't need to know. I'm aware of what is said about me." It wasn't anything new to her. She'd always heard the whispering behind her back, the speculations, the questions about what was 'wrong' with her. She chooses to ignore it.

"It's alright." he pulls her in against his white shirt, caressing her back. She touches his arm, giving him a smile.

"Now, tell me more about this Hypadando," he pulls back from her, his face still in close proximity to hers as he beams. "He seems like somebody I'd like."

"Later, I promise. But now, I'm heading to the city." She gently breaks free from his embrace as she went to the closet. She was hoping to find some kind of replacement for the serum she'd left back home. At least until Naseret can bring it to her when she's not busy. But she was in dire need of it, and icy water didn't always do the trick.

"It's raining." Robert states.

"Not hard, and I need to get out of here for a while," She flings open the closet door and removes a purple, tasseled shawl and small brown round purse with long thin straps along with a hat that matched her dress. "I just need to get away from this crouhole." She pinned the hat to the back of her mane and snuggled the shawl around her. The purse now hung on her left shoulder.

"You're leaving me here?" Robert pouts as he observes her putting on more practical boots in lieu of her sandals, the design with black and white decorative stripes along the sides.

"Do you want to come?" His pouting made her smile. He was almost like a child at times.

He gives an excited head nod, snatching his black coat off the arm of the chair. They walk, arms threaded at the elbow out the room's door. The relief she felt making her feel lighter, almost as if she'd had a large stone placed upon her chest and now was free to breathe and move about. Some time away from this place is what she needed.

"And I'll tell you all about Hypadando along the way." she rests her head against his shoulder.

Tomah and Kikara were enjoying a quiet lunch in the kitchen, sitting on opposite sides of the counter. Radaha was taking her break with

her family that had come to visit, so she was elsewhere. Teora, thankfully was putting a space between them. The lingering residue of the tension from their confrontation earlier was making things uncomfortable. Kikara had her suspicions about her, but she was a little unnerved with their exchange. She had for a brief second, wanted to hurt her. Badly. As angry as she'd been, the experience had left her a little shaken.

Kikara refrains from mentioning those feelings, but tells Tomah the story about the incident with the scanner, since he hadn't heard it. He shakes his head, chewing his food, before responding.

"When I was enlisted I used one all the time. You can't intercept the signal without some special device, since it's a military communication system. It would have to be somebody on the base, which..."

"Why would it be." she finishes.

"Definitely strange." He wipes his hands with a napkin.

"Grazach, you're the first to not look at me like I'm mad." Kikara gives him an appreciative smile. She could always rely on him. Of all the co-workers she'd had, he was the easiest to get along with.

He takes a sip of his drink. "There's been strange things happening though. The kid is still gone. Candy going missing," he gestures with his cup in the direction of the door. "Those huge claw marks."

"And the bowl." she reveals.

"What bowl?"

"Well, when I was telling Gabriel and Radaha about-"

The kitchen door violently bursts open, the ensuing tremor along the wall causing the pans to crash to the tiled floor, the breeze causing napkins to flutter from the counter. Gabriel comes charging over like a raging bull at a muleta.

"Did you tell your retarded friend about me?" His heavy palms come to a rest upon the countertop on either side of Kikara's plate. His face

looming over her, chocolate eyes fuming.

Tomah's pupils dart between the two as he silently picks up his plate and exits. His eyebrows arching up as he gives a final glance back at them as the door shuts behind him.

"What?" she asks, flabbergasted. "No. What-

"Are you sure?" he growls, his teeth gritted.

"I never told her anything, she figured it out," she says, the switch from embarrassment to anger now on. "We weren't exactly discreet. I think Radaha even knows."

And now Tomah you faca idiot.

"The drunk? I don't care if *she* knows," he points a thick finger at her. "I want to know what the fuck you told *her*."

"I didn't tell her anything! She doesn't want to hear about it! Why would I tell her anything?" The few times she'd tried to bring up hearsay in terms of guests, Mirasal responded with a look of apathy. Discussing such frivolous topics wasn't something she was interested in. She certainly wasn't invested in hearing about their affair. And Kikara didn't want the judgement. "I mean she knows we're together-

"That's not what I meant. Did you ever give her any details?"

"No! I said faca no!"

This answer seems to suffice, the anger seeping from his face as he let's out a tired sigh and sits on Tomah's chair, it creaks in protest as his hefty frame settles in on the round seat. He brushes a hand down his features, his breathing heavy.

"Um, are you alright? You look out of breath." She jerks back at the vexed glare he gives in response to her query.

"What is it?"

"I just ran into Gray upstairs." he grumbles, directing his volatile grimace at the door.

"And?" she urges, her upper body hunching over the counter towards him. "I think it could have been him with the scanner-"

"I don't know about that, but he's definitely an asshole."

"Why?" her voice is almost a gasp. "What-"

"Are you sure you never tell her anything about us?" he interjects, holding his chin, his brows crinkling into another scowl as he studies her.

"Yes," she emphasizes the word with a drawn out 's,' blinking slowly, his interrogating wearing her down. "Now what happened? What did he say to you?"

He ignores her inquiry. "There's something wrong with that guy," he lets his hand drop, shaking his head. "Just the look in his eyes, he gives me the willies."

"Well, that's what I've been saying all along," she replies as she sits back, a feeling of validation churning through her.

"But, since there's something wrong with *her*, they're a match I suppose," he says, placing his elbow on the counter. "And I don't know what she's doing passing judgement on anyone else, what with the thug father, not to mention the mother that turns tricks."

"Shut up, don't say that about her." Kikara snaps.

"What? You said yourself that she's like a robot." he says, perplexed at this new show of devotion.

"That was...*before*, now shut up and don't talk about her like that." she scolds. Yes, she didn't have the best view of Mirasal when they first met, but she'd grown to understand her behavior, though not always. At this point she'd grown to appreciate her quirks, as confusing as they were at times.

Gabriel stands, his angry glower comes roaring back. "Did you tell her about my problem?"

She blinks. "...No? Why-"

"He fucking knew. Who else would he have heard it from?"

Stunned realization causes Kikara's eyes to widen. "Is that what he said to you?" she breathes, mouth dropping open. There was no way Gray could have found out from Mirasal. None. She never said anything. And Mirasal certainly wouldn't want to hear it.

"Pacero, I swear to Araseza, I didn't-" she pauses her assurance, pondering, before she asks. "Why would it have to be me? What about the others?"

"What 'others'?"

"The other women you've been with. I'm not your first...am I?"

The chattering of the guests in the next room grows in the stale quiet that follows. He finally relents. "Just one." he says, not meeting her accusatory gaze.

"Liar," she sneers. "More than one."

"Where did you hear that?" he replies, confusion eminent.

"I just hear things, alright?" Her mind reverts back to last night and Gray's comments. Maybe he had heard about Gabriel. Maybe he had spoken to one of his mistresses. Maybe that's why he knew about him. And her. There were other more dubious possibilities as to how he knew. It certainly wasn't her.

And certainly not Mirasal.

She didn't know why she was wasting time with a human. It was beneath her. She'd thought he was different. At least he seemed to be. Not just wanting to see what a roll in the sack with a Thycenian would be like, but rather seemed to genuinely like her. He initially didn't come off as dumb as other humans. But now? She was questioning that. And his mate, she wasn't interested in hurting anyone.

He stood up from the chair. "Don't act like I'm your first either. Why are you so surprised?"

Her lids narrow as she stares him down, giving him a languid head shake.

He scoffs as he headed to the door, opening it. "We both know I'm not, right?" he gives a condescending guffaw as he made his way out.

Giving an enraged growl, Kikara lifts her plate and flings it at the door as it shuts, shattering against the wall with a loud smash, sending shards and food particles scattering every which way.

The vibration is enough to send the painting covering the offensive claw marks outside the door plummeting to the ground. Gasps can be heard as they become visible to the afternoon diners.

Still staring at the door, breathing rapid, she spins around when she hears clicking, clattering sounds. Her heirloom, which she'd left at the end of the counter was making the noises, growing louder as she approaches. It had no reason to be making any such sounds as it wasn't powered on. Just then it seemed to barely levitate and rattled, vibrating, spitting out the pictures placed in its sleek holder. One by one they flutter to the floor below it.

Kikara pauses and reverses her steps at this, her hands coming up to her mouth. She almost-tiptoed up to peer down at them, letting out a whimper as she saw the images; Gabriel. His face becoming more distorted with each picture, his eyes turning to sunken black holes and his tan skin coated with a pasty pale gray.

She lets out another whimper, cut off by her hand cupping her mouth, before she runs out the kitchen door.

The marketplace near the edge of Galivo is bustling with energy, a showcase of smells, a chorus of bantering voices and the laughter of children running along the pedestrians. The booths displayed beautiful crystals, carved goods, jewelry and elegant weaved baskets. The designs displaying folk tales of the culture. The rain, however seems to be limited to the mountainside where the Terog was located. Down here on the streets it was cloudy, but no drizzle, not even a drop. The weather didn't diminish the city's colorful landscape; buildings decorated with a lively kaleidoscope of tiles and

beams, temples with gorgeous stained glass windows, luscious gardens along the edge of bridges that stretch over the wide canal that extends as far as the eye can see. Small narrow painted wooden boats glide along the water's pathway carrying tourists and natives. Some are couples enjoying a romantic ride, some families wanting to see the sights.

As Mirasal and Robert intertwine with the busy crowd, his hand grasping hers, a barely-audible snicker is detectable under his breath.

"What? What is funny?" Mirasal asks as he pulls her along.

"Nothing, just remembered something, that's all." he smiles, drawing her to him to curve an arm over her shoulder. His gaze is being directed to the different booths lined along either side of the cobblestone street, some obscured by the large number of patrons. They stop in front of one booth with but a few huddled around it.

"What's this?" he inquires as they observe the numerous carved items neatly spread out on a light yellow cloth. He points at them, gazing down at her. "They look like the ones you do."

"Not quite, mine aren't as elaborate." she insists.

"I think they are as good. And what are these?" His long thin fingers lift up one of the small delicate marble courtship boxes that rest in a row behind other larger items. The tiny chests are engraved with designs of angular patterns and circles. Some with the image of Ducrea, the Goddess of love.

"It's a courtship box-or *lucra bhaega* a 'love box,'" she explains as she plucks one up, circling it in her hand. "You give it to someone you intend to court."

Imarito had made the one he'd gifted her, and she'd accepted, signifying they were now in a relationship. The box was tucked away in a safe place back home, with some of his clothes and other small items that had been his. Of all the things he'd given her, it was the most sacred. Along with his metals, which were now in the possession of his sister after she'd come into the house without permission and taken them. She'd come home to find her things

thrashed around and clothes strewn about and the girls and their nanny reporting about the uninvited guest. She frowns, staring off, giving Robert a weak smile as he looks in her direction.

"Is it too late for me to give you one?" he grins.

Mirasal giggles. "No, it isn't." She glances down, eyeing the assortment of boxes as a realization flushes over her; such a gesture means they are together officially. And accepting it would mean she's moved on. A commitment that would be a huge change. Her daughters haven't even met him. And then there's the possibility he doesn't comprehend that by doing this, he's telling her he wants to be mates. But perhaps she's reading too much into it-or not enough. Right now, she'll go along with it.

Before she can raise this issue, however, Robert pays the merchant, who offers a hearty 'grazach' handing over the trinket. Robert passes it to Mirasal.

"For you." His lips are immediately on hers, preventing her from verbally responding, his hand cupping the back of her neck, holding her tight. His kisses were rough, always leaving her breathless. The action draws a few giggles from a gaggle of nearby children as well as a knowing grin from the merchant.

"Well, that was quick." the seller quips as she watches Robert and Mirasal stroll away, his arm resting on her shoulder. Mirasal glances up him.

"You know this-" she begins, before she pauses, studying his face as he stops, his limb still being cradled by her shoulder.

Its lighthearted mood is polluted as It senses something. Something It had let slip Its mind. A rash decision, an impulse that It had forgotten about.

Back at the Terog, Teora enters room forty-three.

And screams.

14. Chapter 13

Chapter 13

"Fear will hunt you down, right to the very depth of your soul."

— Aireen Pontillo

Kikara hears the screams just overhead. Muffled as they were, she could tell it was Teora.

"What the iado? What are you screaming like that for?" Kikara yells up towards the direction of the shrieks, growing louder as her footsteps draw near.

The image of Gabriel's distorted face was scorched into her brain, her body still trembling. Now it seems there's something else. She wasn't prepared for it, not now.

Sitting on the first floor stairs, she watches as Teora comes around the corner, almost stumbling over her skirt as she reaches Kikara. The hostility between the two non-existent in the moment. "Roo-oom forty-three! Th-th-ere's something in roo-oom forty-three!" Teora sobs, her hysterical inflection making her almost incomprehensible. She points and continues her overwrought cries as guests send concerned looks her way. One, a dark blonde-haired human man approaches her.

"Are you alright miss?"

Kikara waves off his concerns, assuring him all is well before following Teora to the room where a human writer had been housed.

"Araseza..."

Kikara steps into the room and is met with a gruesome scene. Dried brown blood plastered along the walls, the carpet had been soaked, the stains deepening the red color of the thick fabric. The bed however, has been spared, only a faint splatter peppered along the lower sides of the peach quilt. The scent of the blood thick and cloying. Whatever had happened in this room, it was *brutal*.

"Who was in here?" Kikara's eyes are still surveying the gory scene, sniffing the air.

"A human writer," Teora whimpers. "I remember because she kept yelling about needing quiet. I just came to deliver more towels and when she didn't open the door I-" Teora's voice falters as she spots pink curlers on the nightstand.

"Is it possible you can tell them to keep it down? I'm trying to write here."

"Susa, chiama Higgins, but I'm afraid there's not much to do. I can put you in another room-"

"How can you not do anything? They are being loud! I need my peace and quiet."

Heather gives a huff as she peaked out from behind the ajar door, her red hair is spun in curlers. "I mean, I thought this place was supposed to be for artists? How are they supposed to concentrate with all this going on?" She directs her chin in the direction of the noisy rooms.

"Well, that's what was it was originally," Teora replies. "And I've told them to keep it down. There's not too much noise, really."

She didn't hear anything worth complaining about and felt ridiculous even telling the guests to keep silent. Some amorous murmuring between a couple in the next room and a pair of young women giggling and gossiping in the other. The tourists had taken over and any artist coming here looking for a quiet inspirational scene at this point is being foolish. Guess this one had to learn the hard way.

"Your kind have those huge ears and you can't hear what I'm talking about?"

"Well, you can stick something in those tiny ones you have."

"Bitch." Heather swings the door open farther, pinning the flaps of her bathrobe shut between her fingertips, so she can slam it in Teora's face.

She didn't know what the word had meant, but was sure it was something insulting. As angry as she'd been, she didn't want this. Hadn't wished it upon the dreadful woman. Not for a second. She'd

complained to Radaha, but that was all.

"Where is she though?" Kikara starts moving around the room, lifting the bottom of her orange hem. "She doesn't seem to be here-a body I mean."

She promptly yanks Teora farther inside and slams the door upon catching a glimpse of a quizzical guest opening her room's door. Teora does her best to avoid touching the blood stains with her sandals.

"She's dead." she says, her hands planted on either side of her head.

"No," Kikara replies firmly. "We don't-"

"Look at that!" Teora's finger stabs the air in the direction of the stains.

"Lower your voice...facala."

Teora doesn't heed. "You can't tell me she's still alive!"

"Then where's the body? If she's dead there has to be a corpse," And there was no body to be seen, no stench of rotting flesh. Just blood. "I'm getting Tomah, stay here."

"Don't leave me alone in here!" Teora cries, clutching her head.

"I said lower your voice," Kikara replies through clenched teeth. "We don't want to make a scene, enough have already heard. Now stay here. Make sure nobody comes in. The less coming in and out the better." More assurances will have to be given to the guests. Keeping this under wraps will be a task, if not impossible.

It's only minutes later that she returns with Tomah. He immediately begins to inspect the room, his lavender pupils jetting around as he tries to find some trace of the woman. Just as he spies something under the bed, pulling out his tiny flashlight, there's a gentle knock on the door.

Radaha sticks her head in. "Any sign of her?" Teora, pacing back and forth, arms scissored across her chest, shakes her head.

"Get in here," Kikara maneuvers the cook in with a firm tug on her thin arm and shuts the door. "We haven't found her-"

"I think I just did," Tomah somberly stands up, tucking his small light back into his vest pocket. He nods downward. "Under there...doesn't look like much left. Head and arms are gone." His previous occupation in the army had made him fairly desensitized to carnage, so this wasn't anything he hadn't seen.

Teora's knees give out, hunching over a small basket placed by the wall. The sounds of her retching the only noise in the room in the silent shock that follows. Radaha immediately runs to her, rubbing her hand in a circular motion along Teora's shoulder blades and whispering reassurances in her ear.

Kikara stands looking down at the bed, her lips kneading together. Uncertainty is replacing trepidation. Followed by questions. Panic.

And fear.

Robert's mute demeanor was a little troubling. He'd been talkative and now everything about him had shut down. Mirasal still clung to his left arm, trying to decipher what his pensive attitude meant. Maybe he's upset about something, though she couldn't imagine what. Maybe he just doesn't feel like talking. They strolled along, still with no words between them, until she reaches the booth she'd been looking for.

"Here it is." she says as she releases Robert's arm. He then pointed farther down the street towards an alleyway.

"I'll be down there." is all he says before he saunters off. She frowns as she watches him flip the ends of his jacket back to shove his hands into his black pant's pockets. He doesn't look back, vanishing amid the crowd.

It strolls through the alleyway, incensed. Its mind on the room and the commotion. It had been careless. Leaving the corpse was ill-advised, but such a mistake will not be repeated. It had been careful with Its prey, leaving no traces of them anywhere. Any evidence of Its presence. But It

had been distracted, Its mind elsewhere. Separating from her was the only way to avoid her seeing Its eyes, red-rimmed and raging. It walks, bumping into the random passerby. It growls under Its breath, drawing an inquisitive look from a Thycenian woman passing with her children, pulling them away from Its path.

It could still sense them. The one who It thoughtas dead. But no, it seems they may be lurking. It could feel it. Not actually dead. How could that be? They were dead, It had been sure. But now it seems they may be alive after all.

And they were close.

Mirasal tosses the tasseled ends of her purple shawl back over her left shoulder and starts searching along the shelves filled with various sized bottles. Each containing liquid of different colors. She points at the one she needs; a dark red bottle. She and the vendor exchange smiles as she pays and turns, immediately colliding with a dark green suit. She gasps as her bottle of serum slips from her flesh fingers, being caught mid-air by a large hand.

"Pardon me." The man says in a velvety baritone voice, not unlike her grandfather's.

Mirasal's gaze travels along the outstretched arm as she takes back her purchase. It's that same older man. The one she'd seen twice now. How he was here now was a bit strange as he'd been popping up around the hotel, but she dismisses this paranoid thought. He smiles politely as he surrenders her bottle of serum.

"I am very sorry," he says as he lowers his head. "I should really be more careful."

"It's alright." she assures. His kind eyes are a vibrant golden.

Like Robert's.

"I am Harold Luski. It is a pleasure to meet you," he bows his head, hand across his stomach. "I realize your culture does not engage in the practice of handshaking, so I will refrain from offering. And you are..?"

He has Robert's height too. She looks up at him. "Mirasal. Um, I have seen you around the Terog..." She can smell the rich scent of tobacco on his clothes.

"Yes, I have been sight-seeing and it was recommended." he confirms as he reaches up to give his snowy white beard a gentle stroke, twisting the ends in between his fingertips.

The image of Kikara nearly knocking him over comes on. "I wanted to say that she didn't-"

She pauses as she's drawn to his neck. Beneath the thickness of the bottom of his beard, nestled against his dark-blue tie, is a stunning pendant. Outlined in smooth silver, the center contained a fairly large stone. Different bright colors seemed to be swirling in it; red green and blue. Embellished with tiny flecks of white, it was almost illuminated.

"Oh...that is beautiful." she marvels, still staring at the gem, her blue eyes reflecting its twinkling showcase of light as she lowers her face down to get a closer look.

As she gawks at it, its serenade of colors comes streaming out towards her in a seemingly endless parade of stars, moons, planets and nebulae, almost as if she were standing in a vast space, the marketplace and its crowd dissipating amid the brilliant light show.

"It contains an entire universe." he replies as he fingers it, pulling at the chain, lifting it to give her a closer look. She leans in, not responding to his odd comment, about to touch it when Robert's arm around her shoulders wrenching her back startles her. A thick growl emits from him as he glowers at the man, whose still holding up the necklace watching them leave.

"What was that?" she asks, startled at both Robert's actions and the strange effect the necklace had as he continues roughly guiding her, his arm still gripping her around her shawl. She glances back as they hurriedly walk away farther down the street.

The man is gone.

She halts. "Where is he? Where'd he go?" She scans the crowd of passerby, since he would certainly stand out.

Nothing.

She looks at Robert and abruptly steps back when she glimpses his irises; bright yellow, with a thin line of crimson around them.

"Your eyes," she says as she stares, more than a little alarmed. "They look different."

She backs up further as he pinches his nose bridge. He gives his head a quick shake, casting his gaze down to the ground.

When he looks up again, they are the same. That incandescent golden yellow, almost as if they have a light from directly within.

"Don't be afraid," his voice has changed too, his inflection ragged, rasping. Far more deeper. "It's...fine. It's just, why were you talking to him?" He comes closer, his palms on her upper arms, inhaling heavily through his nostrils, his mouth quivering.

"I've seen him around the hotel that's all. I don't know who-I mean I don't know him." she explains as she tries to avoid the intensity of his scowl, feeling the heat of his breath upon her forehead. She clutches her vial of serum tighter to her chest.

"You've seen him around?"

"Yes. Twice. He was watching me yesterday in the lobby. Who is he? Are you related?" she inquires. The golden amber-flecked spheres situated underneath older man's bushy white brows made the resemblance clear.

Robert's face softens at this, the bright yellow beginning to seep from his pupils, his voice resuming to normal.

"Yes, how did you know?" He almost seems to smile. Almost.

"Your eyes-you look alike. And you're both tall."

"It's my brother," his arms are now hanging at his sides. "We don't like

each other."

Given how the man was significantly older... "Mhm."

"What?"

"I would have thought he was your fasare. Or ahauvo."

"What's that?"

"Grandfather."

"Why?"

The answer was obvious-at least to her. "He's older-much older."

This seems to amuse Robert, as he smiles and brings a twitchy finger up to touch the top of his left ear. "Yes. He is old. Old and stupid and fucking lazy and he's never been any use to anyone ever until-" his angry rant is cut off when he sees the stunned look on Mirasal's face. He sucks in a deep breath. "Sorry. It's just he rubs me the wrong way. And you said he was watching you?"

"Yes, in the lobby yesterday before you showed up. He's what I was staring at."

"You should have told me."

"How was I supposed to know?"

"How did you end up talking to him?"

She taps her metal finger against the round glass base of her vial. "He ran into me at the booth. Kikara had almost knocked him over at the hotel and I wanted to just apologize again. But then I saw his necklace. I had this strange reaction while looking at it. I saw something...what was that?" The incident was jarring to say the least. That feeling she had when staring into the gem left her both fascinated and terrified. She'd zoned out, but it wasn't like usual; more like this strange feeling of losing control.

"Never mind, just don't look at," Robert urges, his voice stringent. He

unleashes another deep sigh as he sees her expression. He adopts a more dulcet tone.

"Look, he's trouble alright? Just don't go near him. And that necklace- don't ever look at it, okay? What you saw can harm you."

"How?" she whispers.

He pulls her closer, face hovering near hers. "It just can. I can't explain it now. I'm not trying to scare you. I just don't want him anywhere near you. It's just he has a way of getting me worked up."

It must keep the other one away. He will interfere again, as he had before. Before It thought the old stupid one was a creature of habit, but no. No, he'd interfered with the hated ones. And now was trying to interfere again. It didn't know what form the stupid old one was taking on, it should have known.

It won't let him interfere, not this time.

Mirasal rubs his arm. "It's alright, I understand. You two don't get on well. I'll respect that. Is he why you were so quiet before? Did you know he was here?"

"Um, yes, I guess I sensed him, in a way, I knew he was here."

She had no desire to get involved in his family ordeal. Not when she had her own problems. It's the last thing she needed. She would respect his wishes. "I didn't really speak to him for very long. It's just I keep seeing him. It's a...bit strange. But I thought I was just being paranoid-"

"No, you're not. Don't go near him." he urges as he pulls her into an embrace. She snakes her arms around his waist as he strokes her auburn mane. She lifts her head to face him.

"We should head back."

"No, fuck that! Let's not have him ruin the day. I want to see more of the city and I know you don't want to go back there yet."

No, you don't want to go there now. "Did you get what you need?"

"Yes." she replies as she presents her bottle of serum. "It's not quite the same as the one I need but it will do."

"What's it for?" he asks as he takes it from her, shaking it slightly to peer at the crimson liquid inside, clear red drops coursing down the sides.

"It's for my pains...but you know that." she gently claims it back.

"I do, but...conversation." he half-smiles.

"Neseret created one for me, but it's back home and she can't bring it now."

"Why not?"

"She's a doctor. She has patients."

"I think you would count as a patient." he replies, broadening his smile.

"I never really thought of it like that." she says as she opens the flap of her purse and places it in, next to the courtship box. There's a beat of silence before he says quietly.

"You were upset that I left you. I just needed some time to think."

She adjusts the strap around her shoulder. "Being quiet and then just wondering off isn't the best way to let me know that there's something wrong. Being upfront will. I don't want to try to guess. That's not easy for me."

He gives a doleful expression. *No, don't apologize. You've nothing to apologize for.*

"...Sorry." *Ugh, It feels a rustle of disgust within Its being.*

She glances around the area. "Let's go. What do you want to do next?"

He points towards a group of people gathered around a trio of street performers. The sounds of laughter and clapping puncture the air. "Why don't we see what's happening there." he says.

As they walk, she glances up at him. For some reason, her mind went back to the painting in the lobby. The way his eyes had looked reminded her of the clandestine ones discreetly placed in the artwork.

The scent of the blood in the room was becoming nauseating. Teora kept a hand on her stomach, the other hand combing through her mane, now unkempt and tangled. Radaha occasionally gives her back a small quick rub. She had vomited again after they managed to pull the torso out from under the bed with the aid of rubber gloves they had stored away in the kitchen. After surveying the damage, they respectfully covered her with a sheet.

Tomah stood with his back against the chestnut dresser, his thumb to his mouth, facing Kikara, who sat opposite him on the bed. Deciding to fracture the brooding atmosphere, Tomah spoke, his voice low and lugubrious.

"It's probably what got the kid. And Candy," he glances off to the side, folding his arms. "And I know Veronica Dell didn't check out."

"Why haven't we found any trace of them, then?" Kikara asks, rubbing the pads of her palms against her arms, foot tapping on a part of the carpet unsoiled by the blood bath.

"You see what it did to her. It could have consumed the bodies. Or hid them," he glances around at everyone's reaction to his theory. Teora's hand covering her mouth. "It's smart. Knew to try to hide the corpse."

"What could possibly do something like this?" Kikara's query is met with a shrug from Tomah, head shaking from Teora and Radaha. Very few native animals could have torn this woman apart in this manner. Let alone have the intelligence to know to try to hide the body. Or be covert enough to remain hidden in the building. It didn't make any sense.

"We have to warn everyone. Tell the Dobson's about their son-" Tomah says.

"We're not sure he's-" Kikara begins.

"The kid is dead, Kikara. So are the others. We need to warn everyone and maybe evacuate."

"That's a little bit of an overreaction."

"You call that an overreaction?" he gestures at the torso, sheathed in an ivory colored sheet, blood now percolating through it. "I call that preventable."

"What do you mean?" Kikara stands up and approaches him, the edges of her eyebrow ridges knotting together.

"I told you there was something in here. If you had just listened." He aims a finger at her, leveled at her face.

"You're blaming me?" she points at her chest. "That's not fair-" She honestly thought nothing would come of those marks by the door. A one-off. She just didn't feel the need to make it a priority, given what was happening and all the stress with the outage and irate guests. Not to mention the tension with Mirasal. It just seemed inconsequential. Maybe she did show poor judgement. Maybe there was more they could have done.

Too late now.

"The claw marks. The missing people. I warned you. Now this woman's blood has been spilled-and it's on you."

Kikara lets out an exhale through her nose, mouth twitching. "We can't create a panic. We just need to keep this quiet-for now. Just pacero, let's figure out what to do first. We don't want anyone getting frightened."

"They need to be frightened-and so do we. Look what this thing-whatever it is-is capable of doing. We don't know where it's going to attack next. We need to be on alert."

Kikara's fear over the experience with the scanner, her heirloom as well as the bowl come flooding into her thoughts and her mouth tightens. Each incident lined up with the arrival of one person. "Him,"

she grits her teeth, the corner of her top lip turning up. "It's him-I know it." The claw marks could have been a repeat of another incident not long ago. Once they had a young thyacasma stroll in through the open patio door late at night, they managed to get it out before the guests woke, none the wiser.

A thyacasma couldn't do this.

"Oh Kikara, stop it!" Tomah's voice rises up. "I'm not going to let you blame this on him because you don't like him!" he throws his arms up, tone getting louder. "Let it go already!" Any concern about the guests hearing what was going down has gone out the window.

"It's not a coincidence. You don't think it's strange that he shows up and all this is suddenly happening?" she hisses, anger ignited, teeth clenching together. Her hands squeeze into fists. Tomah walks towards the door and swings it open.

"No, I don't. You could say that about any number of the guests who arrived at the same time as him. And it *still* wouldn't make sense. It's clearly some kind of animal-I just don't know what. But I'm not going to let you put the blame on him for this."

He exits and manages to shut the door softly behind him, despite himself. Teora and Radaha soon follow, each sending a cursory glance back at Kikara as they do so. A flash of sympathy across Radaha's face as she shuts the door, leaving Kikara alone with her thoughts.

She stubbornly pushes the guilty thoughts aside.

He's wrong. This isn't your fault. You have nothing to feel guilty over.

It's Robert. You know it is. He's connected to all this.

She blows a light brown curl out of her eyes. The quiet in the room-in the hotel itself-only emphasizes what she hears next; a soft sound of breathing.

"Hm?" she spins around, searching the area. From the blood-stained carpet, the comforter on the bed and the nightstand. Still she heard it, the sound of inhaling, loud and clear, unmistakable. It becomes

more prominent and she very slowly directs gaze down, detecting movement, spying the source of the peculiar sound.

The chest of the torso was rising up and down.

Before she could react, it bolts up, still covered with the blood-stained sheet, which slowly peels off, as if invisible fingers are pulling it down, exposing the mangled corpse underneath. Kikara falls back against the door, hand clasped over her mouth, eyes bulged and unable to even move as it slithers towards her on its belly, the sound of 'squishing' noises accompanied its movements.

She manages a shriek as she reaches for the doorknob.

It was stuck.

She struggles with it, pounding the door with her free hand. She repeatedly, frantically turns it until her hand was slippery from perspiration as the torso inches closer, sending panicked glances back at her approaching attacker, almost hyperventilating. She finally manages to swing it open, relief swarming over her as she dashed from the room, slamming the door behind her as the reanimated corpse reaches it. She hears what sounds like a female voice cackling right behind the carved wood.

The doors along the hallway are opening one by one as guests peer out to see what the commotion is as Kikara starts racing down the corridor.

"Tomah! Tomah!"

15. Chapter 14

Chapter 14

"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."

— Lao Tzu

Back in Galivo, Mirasal and Robert are among the spectators to a group of Neeyotyto street performers doing an assortment of tricks involving fire and balancing acts wearing elaborate costumes.

Surrounded by the crowd, a dancer weaves a long colorful ribbon around her lithe form, spinning, twirling as the design blurs together in a spiral encompassing her body. The large crowd begins to clap in thunderous unison.

"That's what clowns do," Robert points at the juggler. "Those kind of tricks."

"The clown?" The image of the doll he'd shown her enters her thoughts, with the cracks rooted along its yellowed glass face.

He nods. "Things like that."

The juggler takes notice of Robert's interest and makes her way over to him, doing a small jig. Beaming, she does a quick spin before she holds out the three golden balls she'd been using in a silent bid to get him to try.

Robert takes them with a huge grin on his face and starts tossing them in the air, passing between his large palms with ease, the gold shimmering in the little bit of sunlight that has broken through the clouds.

Mirasal and the juggler gawk wide-eyed at him as he increases his speed and sends a smile at Mirasal. She laughs and claps as he passes them back to the juggler, who gives him her own round of applause, egging on the crowd to join her. There are a few hoots and hollers

from the rowdy onlookers, encouraging him to do more.

Robert delivers. Removing his red scarf from his pocket, he curls it into a ball, his large hand covering it completely, when he uncurls his long fingers, its vanished. There's a medley of gasps as he then reaches up to start pulling the red fabric from his mouth. Holding it up, he bows to an eruption of laughter and even more clapping.

He lets the scarf fall to the ground. As he bends to pick it up, it scurries out of reach. Almost as if some tiny creature were hiding underneath directing its movements. Scrambling along the pathway, it circles the feet of the spectators.

"Hey, come back!" Robert yells as he runs to claim it, the Thyccenian children in the crowd breaking out in giggling. One of them manages to step on the tail end of the crimson escapee as it dashes by.

"Here!" The boy beams at Robert, who bends over to claim it, offering his gratitude to the child with a pat on his head and a piece of candy, which appears in his palm in a burst of pink dust. The boy's large brown eyes roam over it, amazed, before popping it in his mouth.

Robert then proceeds to stuff the scarf back in its place, only to have it fight, trying to wiggle free.

"Get in there!" Robert says, struggling to shove it in the pocket.

More guffawing from the crowd as he wins the wrestling match. Without warning he does a drop and somersault, jumping to his feet in front of Mirasal.

"Now, the lovely lady will present to me her hat!"

She hands it over, giggling as he takes it out her hand. He gives her right shoulder a small squeeze along with a gentle smile and nod. She touches his hand before he slides it off her. He steps to the center of the crowd. She crosses her arms in front of her as she observes him.

He must have been a performer at some point. He certainly has a talent for it. The way he interacted with the crowd and how they responded was something not many could do.

Squatting down, holding her hat in his right fingers, he passes his left ones over it and removes a fairly large crystal, which he carefully sits on the ground, as well as a small red and white bird. The species not anything Mirasal recognized. It flies off as the crowd let loose deep gasps, watching as it disappears over the sea of rooftops.

"What else you got in there?" Robert quips as he hands her back the hat, his comment met with noisy chortles from the crowd and a mock scowl from Mirasal.

He reaches down and picks up the crystal. Balancing it on the top of his hand, he slowly inches back sliding his hand away, the glass ball seeming to levitate.

This gets his biggest response yet. The audience seems flabbergasted. Stunned silent with but a few low whispers among them. He plucks it from the air and gives it to a random Thykenian woman off to the side. Her mate's face furrowing into a glower at the gift as she gives Robert a smile followed by a small hop. A few onlookers around her reach over to touch it, whispering as they trace their fingers along the silky glass.

"Now for the encore." Robert grins, holding his hand out for Mirasal to take. She shakes her head, mouthing 'no,' but he gently leads her to the center of the crowd.

"Now, the lovely lady will give me her shawl!"

With a rapid glance around at the forest of expectant eyes, she unwraps it from around her shoulders, passing it to him.

"What are you going to do?" she whispers as he takes it, adjusting it in his fingers.

"Just wait." he says as he gestures for her to give him some space.

In an adroit movement, he waves it through the air with a loud whooshing sound, as dozens more of the mysterious birds appear, wings madly flapping as they lift themselves higher above the cheering crowd.

Mirasal gazes at the sky, a wide smile appearing. She keeps her gaze

on the birds as they fly farther into the distance, her heart beating a little faster than before.

When she finally looks at Robert, his eyes are on her, a warm smile on his face as he returns her shawl around her. He pulls her to him for a kiss, his lips pressed firmly to hers. This gets another round of cheers from the people.

"I believe we have been upstaged!" The juggler approaches Robert and Mirasal, clapping and laughing. She and the rest of the performers are being good sports about this random stranger stealing the spotlight.

"We'll have to have you back." she continues.

The performers wave the two off as they gather up their equipment and the crowd quietly disperses, trickling out towards the merchant's booths and rows of small shops.

The woman who'd received the charming stranger's crystal ball is now surprised to see its nowhere to be found; seemingly vanishing from the large tan purse that hung over her shoulder. She drops to her knees, eyes urgently scanning along the ground.

Mirasal tucks her arm around his waist. "Do you have any more hidden talents?" The little parlor trick he'd done back at the hotel in the lobby; the rose in his vest, it seemed simple compared to what he'd done here. She wanted to know exactly how he'd done those things. But logic dictates that 'magic' is just illusion; tricking the mind. Whatever his strategy was, he probably wasn't about to tell. As he'd said before, he can't reveal.

"Well," he replies as he stops, bringing his right hand up to grip her chin, albeit gently. "I can show you later on." Lowering his mouth down to meet hers, the kiss starting light and airy, before becoming more rough. He pulls away, hand still on her chin. "You want to know how I did it?"

"I do, but I know it's supposed to remain a mystery," she replies, looking ahead as they pass the tiny shops, with bronze statues, trinkets being displayed on small tables and other decorative items.

Vivid tapestries blow lightly in the minor breeze that's starting to grow. "I know it involves some illusion. Fooling the eyes-and the mind."

He pushes his bottom lip out, eyebrows arching. "Yes. Actually it's a...bit more than that. I might be able to reveal it to you." he says.

"I would like to know how you did that trick with the birds. It was very impressive. All of them were."

He grins. "I loved seeing your reactions."

She snuggles her head against his shoulder, lifting it to glance at one shop in particular as they approach. A large black sign with gold lettering dominated the area over the doorway that's hidden behind a pair of turquoise curtains.

"Let's go in there," she lifts her metal finger at the entrance. "It has antiques, maybe you'll find something you want."

They walk up the small ramp to the foot of the door, with Robert stepping aside to pull the curtains back, letting her enter first. The shop had gold and black material recklessly hung around the light brown interior, along with thick candles sitting in shiny black holders. They are greeted by the strong scent of incense burning and the shopkeeper snapping "Don't touch that!" at a youthful human couple.

"Hey, it's cool man. Be cool." the young man says, his hands up as he lets go of the small carving he held.

"What does my body temperature have to do with anything?" Saumo snaps, turning and bowing his head as he sees the new arrivals, the abundance of gold jewelry that adorns his ears and neck chiming as he does so. The outfit he wore matches the fabric strung along the walls.

"Buna, Mirasal." he says as he places a long thin pipe to his lips.

"Buna, Saumo." Mirasal replies as she and Robert peruse the shelves filled with religious artifacts and prayer books. Previously she'd found some hidden treasures here. At one point she'd found a

religious manuscript from Earth called a bible that was tattered and worn. It had to have traveled far and wide to reach this modest little shop. Along with old toys that had once been in possession of human children. She'd bought one for her daughters called a 'paddle ball.' Ineti had taken a shine to the object, often not letting it out of her sight.

Robert slips away from her to pick up a large heavy black and silver book off a shelf near the entrance. He lowers his lips to blow a cloud of dust from the cover.

Witnessing this, Saumo mutters under his breath. "I should really clean in here."

"What's this?" Robert turns the book sideways in Mirasal's direction as she comes to stand by him.

"It's the Arak book of Araseza," she says, wiping away the remaining grime on the cover to expose the bronze lettering. The style of the book told her it was an earlier edition; the newer ones weren't so gaudy.

"Who?" he queries.

"Araseza. She's the creator-at least to the Arak," she explains. "And to Rykan, Rykali is the Tusa Masare-the True Mother."

Explaining this would be a task, as it gets complicated. The wars and hostilities between the two groups were as old as the planet itself it seems. Neither wanted to back down and both thought they were right. The chosen ones. She personally had no time for either.

"So, which one do you belong to? Which do you believe?" he raises the book up.

"Um, neither really. I don't adhere to either one."

"You don't pray to any deities?"

"No. I have no use for them."

"Huh," he places the book back down. "That's interesting."

"Interesting meaning...something else?"

"It's just I saw something in your memories relating to a temple."

"I was baptized in the Arak temple and attended until I was fifteen years. That's all, though. I haven't stepped in one since." After she'd received the traditional 'ata'-facial tattoos, she'd lost interest in any religion.

"Any specific reason why?" he prods.

"I don't think it helps-praying I mean." she pauses a second before continuing, "Aradea still attends. She tries to get me to attend with her." Her younger sister seems to think praying in the temple will protect her older sister from whatever harm she may encounter on the job, but to Mirasal, such things weren't necessary. But the younger woman had always been more religious, even her name meant 'daughter of Araseza.'

Neseret on the other hand had a Rykan for a mate and had since defected to that temple. Something that didn't make their mother happy.

"So you don't believe in something greater." He taps the book's cover, as he scratches his forehead, his eyes focused on the floor.

"I didn't say that. Are you religious?" Was he offended? He had mentioned a Goddess name Bessa earlier.

"Not really no, but it's good to be open to things, that's all." He steps closer to her.

"I am, it's just I-"

"Demon! Demon! "

Saumo's voice cracks through the awkwardness between them as he scurries from behind the cluttered wooden counter with a slam of his fist on its surface. He heads directly towards that same leather-clad human couple. The man holding a black marble statue of the demon Donto. The woman's hands come up to grip his shoulders.

"*Demon!*" Saumo continues to holler as he snatches the artifact from the man's hands. "Don't take it out of its case. Bad luck!"

The couple make a hasty exit, with the man muttering. "Man, we stepped into crazy town. Fuckin' insane natives."

The shopkeeper then places the artifact back in its place encased in a glass box with gold leaf edges and points a scraggly finger at it. "This is a demon. Humans can't touch it. He'll unleash his wrath upon me. My shop would burn to the ground and I would perish and my soul would be claimed forever to wonder iado and I would never enter the eternal sky. The disrespect!"

"Well, they don't know. You can't expect them to." Mirasal offers as Saumo's erratic eyes land on Robert.

"You look a little startled. Didn't mean to scare you." Saumo chuckles, his voice lowering to a more civil tone, his nose giving a bunny-like twitch.

Mirasal touches Robert's hand. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." he gives her fingers a light squeeze, along with a smirk as he gazes at the artifact.

"Demon, huh?" He approaches the encasing, irises staring pointedly at it. Saumo's hand shoots up, gold jewelry clanging.

"Stay back. No human can-"

"He's not human." Mirasal cuts in as she follows, standing at Robert's side.

This alters the shopkeeper's facade. "Oh, so you're passing? Good fortune has smiled upon you stranger, perhaps it will rub off on me. Well, I suppose you can see it. But only for a short time."

He takes the sleek black statue out and places in it Robert's hands. The sheen of the ebony surface and maroon jeweled eyes catch the subtle light in the room as Robert turns it over in his hands. Mirasal traces her metallic fingers along it.

"It's Donto. He's the one who hands down punishment to anyone who is cast into iado." she says.

"Iado?" Robert asks, eyes glued on the artifact, still moving it in his palms.

"It's where the lost souls go. The ones who others have turned away from."

"Oh, so like Hell."

"No, it's more like limbo in Easna," she elucidates. "It's an endless void. No light, just darkness. No others around. You just wonder endlessly," she taps the figurine. "And he knows what your darkest secrets are. He uses them to torment you, to hunt you. You can try to run from him, but he always catches up."

Robert looks at her. "Really? Sounds like...something else I...know. I mean, I've heard of."

"Like the Prim? It's similar to that in a way."

"Yes it is. But other myths I've heard. Other creatures. There are ones who know all your fears, they feed off them. Then there's the creatures who feed off the life force of virgins."

"What sort of creatures are those? Demons?" she asks, remembering the disturbing story of Mia and her baby.

"Some are. Some are known as energy vampires. Some are Todash-they're not really demons, necessarily, but can be mistaken for them," he looks to Saumo. "How much?"

"Not for sale," comes the stubborn response. "No. Not at all. It guards my shop. Cannot part with it."

"A demon guarding your shop?" Robert counters, his voice trailing off finishing the sentiment.

"Demons can serve you well, if you treat them with respect." Saumo coolly replies, sounding like the Rykan he is.

"Yes they can. But..." Robert lifts his free hand to pass it along Saumo's defiant scowling face. "Maybe we can discuss it."

With this, the shopkeeper draws a nonplussed countenance, before he finally responds "Well, I'll see what I can do." He turns to head back to his counter, littered with smaller, less valuable statuettes, missing the surprised look on Mirasal's face. He beckons them over with a gesture of his finger.

"Now," he says as he lifts a stack of small, blue books from below the counter. The pile held together with a silver braided bind. "Here, Mirasal. I have Arnamina's poetry books. She asked me to pass them along to you." He pushes them towards her.

Mirasal lifts one up to thumb through it. "She should just keep them."

"Ah, well, it's a reminder for her, I suppose." Saumo shrugs.

Mirasal, keeping her attention on the pages, concurs. "I suppose," she pauses. "Why did she ask you though? Do you...know each other?" He did after all, use her mother's name.

"Oh yes! She used to read these to me during our visits." Saumo smiles as he turns to Robert, while Mirasal stares at him blinking before she snaps up the books and quickly steps away to stand by the exit.

"So what's the best price you can offer for that?" Saumo points to the statue, still in Robert's hands. The two haggle for a few minutes before an agreement is reached and Saumo carefully bags up the artifact in a beige silk bag. He then escorts them to the exit, standing in the doorway, holding back the turquoise curtains.

"See you soon again!" he says as he watches them walk down the pathway, seeing them off with a wave.

"Not likely." Mirasal mutters as they get farther away, holding the books tightly to her chest. Robert nudges her.

"You alright?" He has his new find tucked in the crook of his right elbow, trying to get a glimpse of her face.

"Fine," she says curtly as she stops suddenly. "That's just a picture I didn't need in my head." She averts her eyes to the water in the nearby canal, the boats holding couples and tourists gently traveling along its current, leaving a shimmering trail of large ripples in their wake. Robert dips his head down to scrutinize her face.

"It's not a big deal. Hey, your mother's offering a public service." he grins, lifting his free hand to touch her purple-draped shoulder.

She keeps her head turned away from him. "I suppose," she lets out a deep sigh before lifting her chin at the artifact. "I can't believe he sold you that. He's never wanted to part with it."

"I can be very persuasive," Robert slyly smiles, holding it out. "It's now part of my collection."

"It seems. You're not going to sell it are you?" It was not intended to be a curiosity for outsiders. Sold to the highest bidder. It would be disrespectful.

"No," he states. "No. I like it. I'm keeping it. I just wanted to have it," He looks it over, pursing his lips, face pulled into a contemplative expression. "I could use a demon guarding me."

He glances up, grinning again.

"Has she calmed down?" Tomah asks Radaha as she steps out the room where Kikara is lying down, the door softly clicking behind her. Radaha holds up the bottle of Narculli wine in her hand. Teora stood by silently, her arms crossed over her chest, eyes downturned.

"Yes, after I gave her half of this."

"Is that your solution to everything?" Tomah admonishes.

"Yes it is. And she needed it. Look," she shakes the green glass bottle, the little remains left splashing around the bottom, the label's gold and silver highlights reflecting the light. "Just about gone."

"What do you make of what she said?"

"About the body moving? She was clearly seeing things. The woman couldn't be more dead. It's just not possible." No, the writer had been mauled beyond recognition. She certainly wasn't going anywhere on her own.

This is our problem.

Tomah places his back against the wall across from his co-workers, momentarily averting his gaze to the two teenage Muncy brothers who were traipsing along the hallway across from them, observing and pointing. Suddenly Tomah flares up, waving his arm.

"Get the faca out of here!" he yells as Radaha and Teora both mimic the same stunned expression towards him.

"Tomah? What-" Teora starts before being cut off by his growling.

"They've been nothing but trouble since they've been here. Go!" he barks at them again. Radaha turns and watches the boys retreat, pushing each other aside to pass by, almost tripping, sending scared glances back over their shoulders. Radaha then clears her throat as the boys disappear behind a corner.

"Speaking of the body. What are we going to do? Throw it off the cliff?"

"No," Teora argues. "We can't. We have to try to contact her family."

"And how do you propose to do that, Tee?" Radaha tips her head. "We have no way of finding them. We're better off getting rid of her and cleaning up. Not to mention," she pulls the cork of the wine bottle out and tilts her head back as she takes a fast gulp. "If they're anything like her..." she halts to take another swig. "Like I just said, we clean up and get rid of the body. Let the animals take care of it. Simple."

"Until the next one turns up," Tomah offers, his voice a low rumble, the violet of his eyes now narrowing as he averted them to Teora. "We do it. Throw it off. Otherwise, it's going to be a scandal. And our jobs. We just keep this quiet-at least for now. Kikara doesn't need this." Whatever had happened to her in that room, she certainly didn't need the stress of dealing with investigators and terrified

guests asking repetitive questions. For her sake, they keep this under wraps. She needs to rest.

"But-" Teora's protest is quickly silenced by his angry glower. He then snatches the wine bottle from Radaha's hand and gulps down the remaining liquid before revealing his plan.

"Let's do it. Tonight. When everyone is asleep."

"Now what did ya' do?" Russell Muncy demands as his teenage sons charge into the room, out of breath, sweat gathered in glistening beads along their skin.

"One of the hotel employees just went apeshit on us."

"Language!" Vicky Muncy reprimands.

Carter closes the door. "Sorry. Dude seemed pretty pissed off." He and his twin exchange glances, each giving the other a nod in silent agreement.

"Why?" Vicky asks, briefly ripping her attention away from the neon pink leather purse she's rummaging through, a pack of travel-size kleenex and a tampon tumble out to the floor as she removes her plump hands. Red-faced, she reaches down to snatch it up before it's noticed, tucking it into a side pocket. Neither boy gives a verbal response to her inquiry, it's simply met with passive shrugs.

"Well, it would be best not to anger these people. From what I hear, they got bad tempers on them," Russell grumbles, directing a scowl at each of his sons, his mouth concealed under the bushy dark brown of his mustache. "You two sure ya' didn't do anythin'?"

"No, swear to fuck-" Daniel's hands come up as Carter rapidly shakes his head, fingering the bottom of his gray-trimmed Mickey Mouse shirt.

"Language!" Vicky snaps again as she gathers her frizzy medium blonde locks back in a disheveled bun. "And try to stay out of trouble. We can't afford anymore hospital visits." This trip alone had drained their bank account, but it would be worth it for the bragging rights

back home.

"Sorry, yeah we'll be more cautious, Mom," Carter assures. "There ain't a whole lot to do 'round here."

Terry sits back against the chair he's reclining on. His partly bald head catches the gleam from a nearby lamp as he does so. "Seems to be few employees here, probably just stress an' all. But whatever you decide to do, just stay outta their way."

"Guess so." Carter replies as he turns to his brother, their eyes communicating a silent message. The two boys then retreat back out the door.

"We're gonna go and do some more explorin.' We'll meet you for dinner later." Daniel says as he pops his head back in for a moment, not waiting for an answer before shutting the door behind him.

"Okay, be careful. Remember what I said!" Russell calls after them, the sound of their footsteps on the other side of the door fading.

"Think they even heard you?" Vicky smirks as she approaches the vanity, attempting to fasten her hair in place and straighten her leopard print jumpsuit around her thick frame. Russell sighs, rubbing the shiny dome of his head.

"Who knows? Can't keep 'em cooped up here. Would've been better off if we'd gone on a cruise rather than this place."

"I told ya' I'm not goin' on a cruise. Too many fuckin' germs." Vicky sneers as she shoves a bobby pin between her pink coated lips. Russell sits up.

"And there ain't here? Who knows what we could catch here! Some kinda space rabies. Or a parasite. Eat the wrong thing and suddenly ya' got something poppin' out of your gut."

Vicky turns to him, still wrestling her bun. "Come on! That's just a movie. Did ya' watch that stupid thing again before we left? I told ya' not to!" She swats the back of his head. Russell gives a pained grimace.

"Ow."

Outside, down the hall, as their parents banter, the twins are busy brainstorming.

"Hey," Daniel slaps his doppelganger's arm. "Let's go check out that cave!"

16. Chapter 15

Chapter 15

"It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane."

— Philip K. Dick, VALIS

Melissa sat lounging in the warm bath, long neck resting against the rim, a rag slung over her forehead. Her hair was pulled back into a stubby ponytail, hairs sprouting out from the elastic band that held it together. She slides farther under, tucking her knees down as they were protruding slightly out the water, the chill in the air making goosebumps form along her caramel skin. It would be difficult to get out. She lifts her big toe out of the water to play with a drip trickling down the side of the white porcelain of the tub. There had been no soap in the room, but she had been too tired to burden the staff with a simple request for some.

Candy. Her room held no trace of any foul play, no missing valuables; the few she had. The bed looked like it hadn't even been slept in. The information the employees had given her wasn't much, just that they hadn't seen Candy for a day or two. The timeline was iffy, but the one called Tomah seemed genuinely concerned about her safety. Melissa was an expert at this point at sizing people up and he seemed sincere. No deception. Same with the others. Even though the concern wasn't there with them, she detected no malice, just indifference. Which was nothing new. But no, they seem innocent enough. Again, this was instinct. She knew when someone was trying to pull a fast one. Survival skills.

She shifts her body when she hears a faint rustling. Removing the rag from her head, she gazes over at the bathroom door, listening to see if it will continue.

Nothing.

The water was now becoming lukewarm, her body starting mild shivers. She stayed put for a few lingering minutes, the sound of the dripping faucet of the sink and the sheet of light rain outside the

small bathroom window the only thing her ears are taking in. The peace felt good, even if it may not last long.

She steps out, reaching for a nearby coral towel, droplets of water sprinkle to the floor as she fastens it around her chest. Giving her reflection a cursory glance, she opens the bathroom door and stops.

At the other end of her room, near the bed, stood a rail-thin woman wearing a red mini dress, her platinum hair straggly. She was hunched over somewhat, her back to Melissa.

"Candy?" Melissa steps forward with her hand out, a smile developing but melting just as quickly as she sees the woman's head jerk up in response, still turned away from her. Melissa halts in her tracks.

"Candy? Are you okay? I came here because I hadn't heard from you. Looks like my instinct steered me wrong." she laughs a short guffaw, the smile once again vanishing as she continues to observe her friend. Candy's arms and shoulders start to twitch, her head jerking slightly to either side, still hanging downward. With each movement came a loud bizarre crunching noise. A closer look showed that her skin had a sickly gray-white color.

"Candy...answer me. Why aren't you saying anything? Talk to me. Did something happen?"

Melissa takes a step back, her heartbeat in her throat. She continues to take move backwards, almost unable to even swallow with the dryness forming in her mouth and the thick lump developing in her throat. She manages to take a deep breath, the tightness closing around her chest almost pushing it back up. She grits her teeth.

"Candy! What the fuck! Look at me!"

Candy's head shoots up, she straightens, lethargic, still doing that odd jerking motion, craning her neck around until finally they were facing each other.

Oh, God.

Melissa's hazel-green eyes grow larger, slack-jawed, as she backs herself against the wall at the sight; Candy's jaw was twisted open,

dangling limp to one side, her eyes a milky white, as if the pupils had disappeared into her lids, a black ooze leaking from her mouth. The substance starting to squirt as she struggled to smile.

"M-m-Mel-issa," she gurgles. "I h-h-it-t-the j-j-jack-p-p-ot."

Melissa shrank away from her, sinking against the wall, her knees against her chest, her hand cupping her mouth.

"Candy," she stammers. "Oh, my God..."

Candy startles towards her, limping in a strange twisting motion. Melissa jolts up. "Stay away from me-"

"K-k-ill t-t-them a-a-a-ll, M-i-s-sy. K-k-k-i-ll t-t-the-m-a-all." Candy repeats as she now hurtled towards her, still grinning that lopsided grin.

Melissa, without tearing her gaze from the gruesome sight, stumbled backwards back into the bathroom, a shot of pain shivers down her right shoulder blade as it roughly hits the door frame. She slammed the door, keeping her eyes on it as the thing reaches it, knocking softly.

"M-m-mis-sy, Miiiiiissy." she could practically hear the smirk in its tone. "Oooooooooopen."

"Leave me alone!" Melissa hoarsely shouts, balling her hands into fists and pounding them against the door, her voice almost caving under the sobs she was fighting to keep down.

Smash!

She's thrown back as Candy's hand ruptured through the light brown wood, splintering around her arm as she grasped for the doorknob. Melissa shrieks and falls backwards, feet slipping on the water-streaked floor, hands grasping at the air, reaching for whatever she could see to grab onto as she plunged, a pain impaling her skull as it struck the edge of the tub.

And then the world went black.

"Nobody else can. I don't...Robert?" Mirasal passes her metallic palm in front of his face, his left eye twitching, his mouth partly open. "Are you alright?"

He gives his head a shake before he answers. "Yes, just thinking," he snuffles, his fingers coming up to run them along the back of his left ear. "The usual." he says as his gaze follows the passerby outside the large window of the small cafe they were sitting in with only a handful of others seated at the dark blue tables nearby.

The yellow wallpaper emblazoned with large white birds and leafy trees made for a cheery environment, a contrast to the dreary weather outside. Mirasal's shawl rests on the back of her chair, the tassels nearly meeting the floor, while Robert has removed his coat. Both had drinks sitting in front of them, but neither had seen much attention, along with the small plate of food she'd ordered.

"You know," she leans in. "They have tagro pie here." Robert gives her a glare accompanied by a low growl.

She chuckles. "Just playing. As I was saying, I love the smell of strange things. Like gasoline from a ship, or wood that's been burned. Is that too odd?"

"No, no it's not,"

It could tell her It loved the smell of fear, but that certainly isn't something one mentions in a conversation.

"So, you can actually taste the different spices in that individually?" he queries, chin lowering at her dish.

"Yes, I could even replicate it if I want to," Mirasal smiles. "It's a talent."

"That's impressive," he says. "Your senses right?"

"They're a little sharper than average. Like my hearing. I hear noises nobody else notices. Like I'll hear a very low buzzing sound when I'm sitting in the ship that nobody else can hear. It's a little distracting at times."

"I guess it would be," he looks to her food again. "You um, don't like it mixed?" She'd spent five minutes separating the proportions.

"No. It's just...I can't have certain food mixed with each other. Like this-" her fork touches the short thick noodles on the side of the plate. "I couldn't have those mixed with this," she gestures to a pile of green veggies coated with a lumpy red sauce. "It makes me uncomfortable. I just can't do it. The cook mixed them together. I just can't eat it that way. If I have to I can, but I prefer not to." Normally, this would embarrass her to admit. Her grandfather was the only one she'd discuss it with, but Robert made her feel at ease.

"Oh, well, that's why I wanted you to teach me," he replies, fingering the handle of his cup. "You notice details. And-" he pats the stack of books. "You can teach me about your poets."

"I really don't read much of it, to be honest."

"Even though your mother writes it?" he asks, placing an elbow on the table.

"She used to," She lifts her cup, pausing before it touches her lips. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

"No, not really. Why'd she stop?"

His gaze is directed back to the stack of blue books, the silver slender rope binding them hanging off the edge of their table.

"She hasn't, I don't think," Mirasal looks away, blinking as her eyebrows furrow. "Maybe she still writes it. I don't really know. She hasn't really mentioned it. But they were published when she was young. Under an assumed name. She didn't want people thinking she was only being published because of her masare."

Her grandmother, Sensza is a well-known poet, so her mother had used a simple pseudonym-Mina-to publish her works.

"So, her mother is one too? Is she famous?" His fingers move to untie the silver bind around the books, lifting one and opening it, only to see it's not in English.

He frowns. "You'll have to read these to me," he holds it out to to her. "This is Terthach right?"

"Yes, it is. And yes she's well-respected. Not necessarily 'famous,' just among the poets and artists."

"And beatniks." he adds.

"...Beatniks?"

"You don't have those types here?" He closes the book, placing it back atop the stack, finally lifting the small cup in front of him to draw a sip. His eyebrows wrinkle as he studies the liquid inside.

"Um, no."

"It's something that was popular on Earth, a movement, a way of thinking. Have you heard of Jack Kerouac? Or Allen Ginsberg? Or Helen Adam?"

"No, I haven't." Human literature, unlike the music, hadn't made a dent here. Caldoris, Naseret's mate, was the only one she knew who read some of it. They were in the same unit together and he'd never mentioned those authors to her.

Robert nods, his tongue pushing against the inside of his cheek as he stares at the black and white striped pattern at the base of her hat.

"Man, this town is dullsville." Two men sit in their 1958 Chevrolet Impala, smoking a joint, which is nearing its end, passing it back and forth, the smoke cloud consuming the air inside. One of them rolls down the window, tossing out the stub, letting the fresh air escape in. "You got the Kerouac and Ginsberg ones?" he asks, brushing his hand along his deep brown jacket.

"Yeah," the other man yawns, thumbing behind him, the moonlight outlining the black and white stripes of his sweater. "In the backseat. The Helen Adam one has gotta go back tomorrow, though. Barbs will kill me." He raps his fingertips along the dashboard.

His friend spits out the window, turning back with an eyebrow arched. "Chicks, huh?"

"Yeah. Hey you want some?" man one flips open his glove compartment and removes a small, white clear bag. "Barb's brother, man. He got me the good shit while we're jungled up with him in his pad," he grins, shaking the baggie, sliding a tiny round mirror out the compartment. "Can ya' dig it?"

"Fuck, yeah, man. But we gotta be careful, the fuzz might be around." Man two glances around them, observing the parking lot, a virtual ghost town at this hour.

Emptying a small portion of the white powder onto the mirror, the two men proceed to take turns snorting.

"So you and Barbs gonna end it or what? I mean you got that chicken waiting in the wings." man two wipes his nose off, letting loose a small sneeze.

"Her and Barb's sister, even though she's a bit of a kookie." man one guffaws, a thin line of clear liquid crawling down his nose and over the edge of his top lip. He chuckles, the liquid trickling onto his front teeth. Just as he brushes his mouth off he catches something in the rear view mirror.

"What the Hell?" he coughs, surprised as he sees his blonde girlfriend's clear blue eyes in the reflection. He glances back at her as she gives him a pleasant smile, her hair done up, wearing her favorite polka dot lime green dress and off-white gloves.

"Hey, Freddy!" she's now grinning, giving a little wave, her pupils taking on an odd golden-yellow glow. She slowly opens her mouth as her teeth start becoming elongated, pointed. Her gloved hand quickly comes up and snaps his neck, killing him instantly. His head hits the steering wheel with a thud as his friend screams in hysterical confusion, bringing his hands up to block whatever attack may be coming.

As he continues his cries, his panicked bloodshot eyes looking at Barbara- at least it looked like her- her mouth expands further, jaw unhinging as she comes down on his neck, the points of dozens of needle -like teeth cutting through the jugular. She yanks him closer to her by the shoulders as streaks of bright red spurt out, soaking the car seats, splattering across the windows, the car shaking as the attack continues.

Afterwards, It wipes Its mouth, Its flared irises finding a bag of books on the backseat, the light brown material now stained with blood. Still in the skin of Barbara, It opens the car door, Its white high heel stepping onto the blacktop as It drags the bodies out and down into the sewer; the books slung over Its shoulder.

Down in Its lair, as It nibbles on a finger, It starts to read.

It shakes Its head, snapping back into reality. "Aw, well. I used to read their stuff a lot. Along with Sylvia Plath," He slips another book from the stack and leafs through it. His pupils searching rapidly along the words on the pages.

"Sylvia Plath. What's she like?"

"Dead. For one thing," he sits the book back down and briefly adjusts his black vest, scoping the area around them, observing the patrons. "She actually killed herself."

"That's...why?" Mirasal asks, the vertical stripes along her forehead distort sharply down the middle as they wrinkle.

"She was depressed, her husband had left her," he continues. "But, it's what she wrote that matters. Her illness drove her creativity. Sometimes those types aren't meant to stick around very long." He gives a shrug, lifting his cup for another sip, the corners of his mouth tugging down as he regards the dark brown contents once more.

Mirasal's flesh hand comes up, planting her chin between her thumb and index finger. "I suppose," Her mother used to lay in bed, sometimes for hours, room dark, saying nothing. This wouldn't happen too often, but when it did she and her sisters did not disturb her.

"What is it?" Robert's eyes are on her. "...Your mother?"

"Um, yes."

"How did she...get into her profession?" he queries as his fingers drum on the top of book stack. "I mean, why didn't she keep writing? And not pursue that?"

Mirasal shuffled in her seat, bringing a leg over the other. "I'm afraid I can't answer that," Her mother wasn't one to talk about her emotions, certain subjects were not to be broached. "I can't really say. I think it was only supposed to be temporary." That was her best guess really.

"It's her parents that own the hotel, right?"

"Yes. I didn't meet them until I was ten, actually. She didn't talk to them for a long time."

"Really? How come?"

More guess work. "Family issues, I suppose. Just issues one can have with one's parents." Although her grandmother has made hints about what caused the strife, she's never outright stated. None of them have.

"Can I meet her?" He folds his arms on the table, pushing aside his cup, giving it a glower as he does so. Mirasal looks to him and then his beverage.

"You...don't like it?" she smirks.

"No, not really."

"Can't really blame you, it does look like diarrhea," she giggles as a grimace flashes across Robert's face. "It's not really for everyone. We can get you something else." The drink resembled mud, but was tasty.

"No, that's okay. But, how about it?" He takes her good hand in his, massaging her fingers in his palm. "Your mother I mean?"

"Probably not today, she has her daysleepers to look after."

"Daysleepers?"

"It's what she calls her prostitutes." she replies, tapping the rounded tips of her metallic fingers along the shiny surface of the table. There was another reason; her mother could be a little ornery. Not rude, just a little abrasive.

"You're worried about me meeting her." Robert's watching her when her mind focuses again.

"Well, she's a tough woman and not afraid to show it. If she doesn't like you, you're going to know it."

"I think I can handle it." he smiles.

"I know, but she's-"

"Buna." a throaty female voice interjects. Mirasal and Robert both glance up to see a Thyrcenian woman in a bright green and red dress and shawl, colors that complemented her light brown pupils. She leans down until she was fairly close to Mirasal's face.

"You're *her* daughter." Her ears were pinned back, lips squeezed into a stern line.

"Um," Mirasal stammers. "I-"

"Your masare is spending a lot of time with Saumo," the woman continues, her gaze staying pointedly on Mirasal. "He claims she's teaching him about poetry, but I know better. I know better."

"It's his choice to go to her and I assume he's paying for the visits," Mirasal says evenly, staring ahead, her fingers cup her glass, roughly rapping against the gold swirl design. The warmth of the woman's breath upon her cheek was growing hotter. "It's her business, not mine"

Her eyes avert to Robert, glowering at the woman, that same eerie glow as before forming within his pupils.

With her attention focused on him, her cup is grabbed up from between her palms, the considerable amount still left at the bottom thrown down the front of her dress. Mirasal's breath catches, hands up, gawking down at the brown bleeding through the threads of the fabric.

Robert swiftly jumps to his feet, a dull roar tearing through his chest as his massive hand snatches the woman by her throat, lifting her from the ground in a blur of fabric as she lets out a stifled cry. The

scant few patrons are gasping as Robert slams the woman to the marble-tiled floor, his teeth bared as he pins her down, straddling her. He continues to roar, spittle splattering across her squinted features, before Mirasal tugs on his vest.

"No," she urges. "Don't, it's not worth it. You'll just get in trouble, pacero."

He continues to stare up at her, irises wild, still holding the woman tightly in a death grip.

"Pacero." Mirasal pleads, still pulling his vest.

Slowly, his incisors withdraw into his skull, the yellow leaking back from his pupils as he peers up at her. He gingerly stands up, facing her, breathing heavily through his nostrils, trying to keep his lips pulled over his teeth, which hadn't shrank back to normal yet.

The woman shakily lifts herself up, a stunned whimper escaping her as she staggers towards the door. She rolls her shoulders, giving them a dirty look as she retreats. Robert starts to growl again.

"It's alright, let her leave." She gives the woman a hard stare, hand to his chest, the expression mirrored on Robert's face. He turns his attention to Mirasal, his eyebrow ridges wrinkle as he gazes over her ruined garb. The beauty of the colors now tarnished. She holds out the sides of the skirt to survey the damage, turning up her eyes at him, a look of despondency.

"This was a new dress." she frowns.

It scans the cafe, the surprised faces of the patrons are on them, whispering, some snickering, hands obscuring their mouths.

"He almost knocked that mad bruga out!" one woman laughs, nudging her mate's arm.

It had lost control, made a spectacle.

Not wise.

"Come on," he drapes both his long arms around her, pulling her to

him. "We'll get you a new one."

Kikara bristles as the door to her room swings ajar, her chest clenches as she spies a head peek in, the silhouette unrecognizable. The hallway light just outside not much help in discerning any features. The sanctuary of this darkened room was being violated.

"Who's there?" she demands, voice shaky, her nose sniffing as she props up on her elbow. She reaches her hand over to find some makeshift weapon, her fingers locating a brush on the nightstand. She lifts it above her head, feeling her heart rate increasing, pounding against the cavity of her chest. "Who's *there*?"

"It's me," Gabriel whispers as he hesitantly continues into the room. "Didn't mean to scare you. Look, I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean to be an asshole. I wasn't honest with you before, because..." he pauses as he tried to make his way through the black hole he'd stepped into, his pupils slowly adjusting to the dark. Gradually, he could make out her form on the bed.

"Shut the door." she snaps. He does as directed, keeping his eyes on her and what he detects is some kind of object in her hand. This gives him pause as he suddenly remembered what an old timer had told him upon first moving to this planet; a malicious Thycenian woman is worse than any disease you could contract. When it looked like no attack was coming, however, he continued heading towards the bed.

"Where's a light?" he asks, hands searching the air. His question is soon followed by a small 'crash' sound.

"Ow! Shit!" he grumbles as his kneecap meets a nightstand. "Fuck that hurt. Aw, here we go!"

He manages to feel the lampshade, sliding his fingers down around the edge for the switch located underneath. The light floods the room as he plops down, the bed creaking under the duress.

Kikara rests her head back to the pillow. "I thought you left." she mutters, wariness lacing through her tone. No hint of anger or disgust.

"I-I came back. Tomah told me what happened-some of it anyway," He gently runs his hand through her light brown mane as he sees the glistening tears leaking from her eyes. She sits up, throwing her arms around his thick neck.

"It came at me! That torso. It was crawling towards me! And I couldn't get out and-and-" her words falter as she sobs, pulling him tighter. "And all these other things keep happening and I feel like I'm going mad!" She lets go of him, slowly wringing her hands as she continues her weeping.

Gabriel pulls her to him again, cupping the back of her head, feeling how rapid her heartbeat was against his own. Tomah had filled him in on the Heather Taggart murder, but hadn't given him details on what had happened to Kikara in the same room where the body had been found. Only that she'd had a scare and was pretty shaken up about it.

But whatever was going on, he has to protect her. He has a gun, back at his home. He'd never even used it, but now it was time. If something was lurking around the hotel, be it animal or otherwise, he had to help.

"Kiki, I have to go but I'll be-"

"It's that man," Kikara lifts her face to peer at him. "It's that Gray. I know it is. I feel it," her voice is strangely serene, calm as she stares off past him. "It is him, doing this. I know it," she gestures with her finger, twitching visible, pointing at nothing in particular. "It is. It has to be."

"Um, Kiki, I'm gonna go get my gun. I'll be back, I promise."

She doesn't acknowledge his comment, still staring ahead.

He makes his way to the door, still watching her, stepping out and shutting it behind him. Just as he's about to walk away he sees far down the hall to his right against a wall; a wheelchair. An older model certainly from the human world. Its raggedy green leather back is pointed away from him, just sitting there, seemingly abandoned.

Must belong to a guest.

With a shrug, he turns to leave, pausing when he hears a cackle. So faint he had to strain to hear it. A voice that seemed familiar. *Oddly* familiar. A wave of bumps gradually prickles through his skin, hairs rigidly standing on end as he turns around to glance at the chair again.

No, it couldn't be. Wholly impossible.

It suddenly spins around on its own, facing him, the sound of the disembodied cackling still audible. Growing louder.

"What the fuck." Gabriel murmurs, glancing around in an attempt to find the source of the mocking voice.

The laughter raises in volume as the chair starts to come at him. Languidly at first, then speeding up.

"Holy shit!" Gabriel's knees give out, falling backwards as the wheelchair picks up momentum, doing wheelies as it continues to furiously come for him. The cackling accompanying it, almost as if an invisible driver were seated in it.

Stumbling up, he grips the doorknob. He flings open the door to Kikara's room and dashes in, just as the maniacal possessed chair zooms past, the laughter dying down as he slams the door shut. He stands facing Kikara, who shoots up, grasping the pillow.

"What's wrong?" she asks, her still-watery eyes now alert with concern and panic.

"I don't know," he breathes, trying to catch his breath, putting his hand to his chest, feeling the throbbing of his heart. "I don't know."

17. Chapter 16

Chapter 16

"God hath given you one face, and you make yourself another."

— William Shakespeare, Hamlet

The dress shop was down the street from the cafe, just beyond the canal. The stains would be nearly impossible to remove from the fabric, so splurging on a new one was the only option. Mirasal and Robert strolled along the street in quiet contemplation for a few moments before she breaks the silence between them.

"You really shouldn't have attacked her. Did you know she was going to do that?" she says softly, glancing back over her shoulder, happy to leave that embarrassing scene behind them. Some of the patrons had spilled out onto the street, pointing and laughing.

"She did it before I could stop her. I got caught up in the moment," he runs his finger under his nose. "I just wanted to scare her, that's all."

"Well, it worked. She was terrified. It's just," she stops, hand on his forearm. "The authorities issue harsher punishments to non-natives. If she or anyone else reports what happened..." Robert could be thrown in jail and never released. Possibly killed. Attacks on natives from humans or otherwise were not tolerated, especially at this time of unrest. The Thycentian Senate had issued a warning to anyone traveling or immigrating to the planet; this world is not yours.

"She won't. Nobody will," his full lips spread thin as he smirks wide. "You're worried about me."

"Yes. When it comes to outworlders, they're out for blood. You could be used as an example. A warning to others. They wouldn't go easy on you, as they say." There had been a human farmer who had fought with his Thycentian neighbor, got arrested and was, a year later, still in prison. Over a dispute involving land.

"She stepped over the line-and she knows it. She won't say a word,"

he replies, extending his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer. "No worries."

She touches his hand. "It's just you're an outsider, this is our planet, and there's a lot of tension. Fighting going on with the humans."

"I know, but don't concern yourself with it. I'm a big boy, I can handle it," he stops a beat before adding. "And I'm not human."

"You're still an outworlder, though. And you look it-that's enough. There's some...*resentment* over ones who can pass."

Robert scowls. "Yeah, I've noticed that. But I'll be fine I assure you," he looks to her soiled frock. "She's mad at you because he visits brothels? Maybe she should try pleasing him."

Mirasal can't contain a giggle at this. "I don't know how they ended up together. I'm amazed she'd even touch him. Since he's beneath her."

"Obviously he's not spending a lot of time there." Robert quips.

Mirasal stops mid-step, giving a quizzical look before its usurped with a smile as she meets his grinning expression. "That's terrible!" she laughs. "But...um...it's just he's considered beneath her station."

"She comes from money?"

"Yes. He doesn't have any. He came into it when he mated her," Arita is from a well-connected political family, marrying Saumo must have rattled her relatives. Mirasal looks out across the cityscape as they approach the shop. "Maybe she's not all bad."

"Except he'd rather be elsewhere," Robert replies. "I guess it's worth it for the money."

"Saumo a fortune-seeker? No. He still works in his shop, when he could sell it, live a relaxed life," she pauses. "It might be he needs attention. Usually, it's...they need a little bit of reassurance. Masare says most of them just complain to her about their lives and such. Sometimes just companionship for the night-or two."

"Yeah, like I said she's providing a service right? It's just work. That's all," Halting, he slides his arm off her shoulders, shoving his hands in his pockets, turning his torso to face her. "You know it's-" his top teeth come down to gnaw on his bottom lip. "It's one I've used before. Just when it was necessary."

Mirasal gives him a smirk. "You have to know I wouldn't judge you for that."

"I do. I'm just putting it out there. So you know I'm not a hypocrite."

"Alright, then. It is a little surprising though." she says as they start to move along, before he stops, hands still concealed in his pockets.

"Why is that?"

She pauses to glance back at him. "It's just I wouldn't think you'd have to pay for it, that's all." She begins to take a few steps but Robert's hand on her elbow draws her back to him.

"Why is that?" he asks, his lips twitching upwards, a playful glint in his irises.

"Oh, come now, you know why I think it," she replies. "Do I really have to say?"

"I want to hear you say it." His mouth has now broken out into an enormous roguish grin.

"Well, you're very attractive and charming. I wouldn't think you'd have to pay for it. That's all," she replies, those cerulean spheres now turning to the canal and the sounds of children laughing as they sit cradled on their parents' knees as they peer over the side of their boat. "Somebody like Saumo, it's understandable."

"It's a little easier than relying on charm alone." he says, his pleased grin turning serious.

"I suppose so."

They continue along the street until they finally reach the dress shop and Robert reaches to grip the silver door handle, gesturing her

inside as they pass under the blue and white sign. As they do the Thycenian merchant woman runs up to them, the robes of her burgundy dress brushing along the champagne rug sitting in front of the entrance.

"Buna...ugh." her smiling eyes are almost immediately drawn to the brown spot evident on the front of Mirasal's dress.

"Oh, what have we here?" she grimaces, attention still on the stain. "That's not good." The gold and silver rings of her fingers cling together as her palms meet each other.

"Some crazy bitch threw a drink on her. We'll need another one." Robert says as Mirasal's head cranes up at him. Robert puts his hand to her shoulder blades, edging her forward as he offers a telepathic assurance.

It's what happened.

I know. But it's a little humiliating.

Don't worry about it. This lady has done some insane shit. I can see it already. Don't worry what she thinks. I'm pretty sure this isn't her only job, if you know what I mean.

"You're in good fortune. I have one left and I believe it could be your size," the merchant woman throws her hands up, bangles jangling. "Come with me."

Mirasal follows after the woman as she takes her to another room. She glances back at him, giving a small smile that he returns. Placing his purchase on a chair near the door, he returns his large hands to his pockets. Whistling, he casually begins to meander, coming to a rack of dresses. Triangles, circles and blunt straight lines pattern the material. One dress in particular stands out, a light rose-colored frock.

"Do you like this dress?" Martha spreads the fabric out for Robert to admire, beaming, her blonde ringlets tipped with the moonlight from the nearby window.

"It suits you," Robert smiles, readying his brushes. "Beautiful as always."

He suddenly peers around their environment at the candles and fireplace blazoned with 'Good Cheer, Good Friends,' giving off enough light to paint a decent portrait. He points to the small wooden chair with a large brush.

"Sit."

"Are you sure you want me clothed at all?" she giggles as she positions herself on the seat, tossing her shoulder-length blonde curls back. Robert peeks his head out from behind his canvas with a grin made all the more sinister-looking by the lighting around them.

"If you would prefer otherwise." The arch of his eyebrow ridges rise up, casting a shadow along his forehead. Martha doesn't waste time shedding her garb. She stands nude before him, playing with the strands of her hair, disheveled by her hasty removal of her clothing. Her delicate features have a spark of worry. A nervousness crawls up her pale skin, goosebumps breaking to the surface of the back of her neck as she fingers the gold cross resting on her chest.

"This is so sinful, I shouldn't really. I don't know what I'm thinking." she studies the floor, toes wiggling.

"Just relax," Robert assures. "Now sit."

"Maybe we could do this a little later?" she approaches him, running her fingers through his hair. Robert stands and grabs her waist, backing her over to the couch across from the fireplace, the eyes of the people in the portraits strewn along the walls seeming to watch them.

Martha nibbles his neck, pushing him farther back onto the cushions. As she does, she looks up at the paintings and their unsettling, eerie expressions. The one of a man with a dark brown mustache over the mantle of the fireplace was especially unnerving.

"Feels like they're watching us." she frowns. Robert digs his now-elongated nails deep into the back of her scalp.

"Um, that hurts a little." she flinches, the pain causing her to squeeze her lids tight as she hears a male giggling. Opening her eyes, she looks up; that same portrait over the fireplace has its eyes on them, and she could've sworn his mouth was now smiling.

"Hee-hee!" comes a female voice.

Martha jumps up, pale skin a soft orange in the glow of the embers still burning. "What is that? Is somebody here?"

"What a whore. Your father will be shamed!" comes another, different male voice. Then a chorus of different voices, male and female, start chortling, talking over each other.

"You tramp!"

"Your family would be embarrassed of you!"

"Put your clothes back on whore!"

"Daddy told you to stay away!"

Martha is spinning around, frantically searching for the source of the heckling.

"Who is here?!"

She continues her whirling around, hands to her ears as she sees all the portraits' eyes and mouths are moving, laughing, taunting. Martha, distraught, looks down at Robert. Mouth falling open at what she sees; not Robert but, something, some...creature. Its pupils matching the embers of the flames, set in blood-red blotchy skin and a bald head that no longer held any trace of his auburn locks. It rises from the couch, pointed teeth poking from its lips.

A demon.

Before Martha can let loose the scream nudged in her throat, the creature lunges, teeth aiming for her jugular. It tears into her as the crackling of the fire dies out.

"Hey, you're a cutie!" A petite human blond is at Robert's side, reaching out to finger the front of his coat, a thick layer of black polish slathered atop her nails, matching her lipstick and shirt. "Why don't ya' forget about whoever you're with and come with me? I think you'd be curious about what I got-"

Her flirtation is cut off by fingers tightly gripping her jaw, nails digging into her cheeks.

"Get the fuck outta here." he growls, shoving her away in the direction of the nearby exit. She falters backwards and starts to huff towards the door, stumbling as her spiked right heel catches a crack in between the tiles.

"Fucking asshole." she mutters, a glower seizing her features as she steps through the threshold, the runs in her black transparent silk stockings becoming visible in the minimal daylight.

Out of the corner of his vision, he sees a second Thykenian merchant woman, a pile of folded clothing sitting in her arms, blinking as she stares at him.

"Well," she says, setting the clothes on the counter. "That was inappropriate of her."

"It's fine." he gives a wave of his hand as he casts his eyes back to the woman making her way down the street, cursing at a few passerby as she bumps into them.

"Get the Hell out of my way!" Her voice is muffled behind the barrier of the large glass display window of the storefront.

"Go back to where you came from then!" came an agitated male voice from somewhere within the parade of Thykenian pedestrians.

"That face paint she was wearing was *atrocious*," the merchant woman says before cheerfully adding, "It's lovely you're so devoted to your mate." She begins unfolding the clothing pile and starts to drape them along the racks behind the counter.

"We're not actually-"

"Here she is!" the first merchant woman announces as she stands in the doorway of the adjacent room, stepping aside, gesturing Mirasal out into the open. "Doesn't she look beautiful!"

Robert smiles in agreement. "She does indeed," He extends his palms out as she approaches, his fingers curl around hers as she reaches

him. "It looks perfect-but it did before."

Mirasal gives him a peck on the cheek. "Let me pay for this." she says as she returns her shawl to her shoulders, slinging her purse over and opening it to retrieve her small coin bag.

"No, no, no-I'm paying."

"No, I can't let you do that." she argues as he pulls his wallet out, presenting a handful of coins.

"Let's get you a necklace too. Pick one." He nods down towards the elegant jewels on display beneath the glass countertop. Each one a work of art, sculpted in fine stones, crystals and polished beads.

"No, I can't. You don't have to, I don't need a new necklace." she shakes her head.

"It's not a matter of *needing* one. I want to get you one. Let me."

"Just-"

"Let me." He gestures again at the row of necklaces.

The first merchant woman grins giddily, her head rapidly nodding. "Go ahead! Do as he says. Pick!" Her eagerness causes her co-worker to conceal a giggle behind the back of her hand.

"Landa, you can at least pretend." she snorts and is quietly silenced by a reproachful look.

"Shh!" Landa's head shoots back to Mirasal. "Now go on."

A eager smile spreads as she watches Mirasal nibble her bottom lip in rumination. She finally lifts her flesh hand, trailing it along the casing as she comes to a stop on a red and gold piece, the least expensive of all of them. The long red oval beads matched the dress.

"That one," she taps the glass. "That one is good."

Landa carefully removes it from the case and begins to hand it over when Robert's fingers snatch it up, taking it from her grasp, coins

clinking as he tosses them on the counter.

"I'll do it. I want to," he says as he unhooks the thick clasp, draping it around Mirasal's neck, and snapping it in place. "There." He wrenches her around to view it resting on her chest, sitting just below the modest gold choker she already had on.

"It's so..." Mirasal begins. She wasn't sure how to describe it as she peered down at the beaded collar, touching it. A warm feeling crept over her as she met Robert's proud gaze. "It's just so..."

"It suits you," Landa finishes. "It brings out your lovely eyes."

"Yes it does." Robert brings his finger to Mirasal's face as she suddenly hugs him tightly, her head pressed against the collar of his dress shirt, arms entwined around his frame.

"Grazach." she softly says against his chest, keeping him in the embrace as he rubs the back of her head.

"Will that be all?" Landa asks as she scrapes up the scattered coins on the countertop.

"That's all we needed." Robert replies as Mirasal slides her arms out from around him. He takes her hand in his as they walk to the door. They both wave goodbye as they exit and Landa drops the pile of coins in an ornate box behind the counter, shutting the lid, unaware that after she did so, they disappeared.

Robert and Mirasal stroll along the street as she gazes up towards the Terog, not far in the distance. It was time to return, something she wasn't looking forward to.

"We better head back." she yawns. She was already worn out when they left, now she was exhausted.

"You're tired." Robert says, pulling her closer to him with his free arm, the other cradling his statue, allowing her to use him as a crutch, nestling her head against him.

"Very." she replies as she looks off to the side, spying the bar and brothel her mother owns across a large bridge.

"That's her place." Robert had read her mind.

"It is. I'll go in and ask her when the best time is to come and visit." They cross the bridge and come to a stop in front of the entrance guarded by two blue stone statues of aralia birds; her mother's favorite. The neon sign is off, but there's already a good number of customers coming and going, as sunset is coming on. It always came to life at night. Bustling with natives and tourists alike.

"Not now, huh?" Robert queries, stepping aside as a human couple comes bursting out the double doors, laughing and holding each other.

"No, not here." Mirasal replies. Her mother's house would be a more appropriate place for introductions. Her mother would be too busy here, coupled with the noise in the building as night fell. No, a quieter place like her childhood home, where her mother still lived, would be much better.

A pair of Thykenian prostitutes stood nearby chain smoking, having a low conversation in Terthach as they linger a few feet away from the door.

"If you ask me, his masare carried him in the pouch for too long." one says when they both spot Robert.

"What is this?"

"Ugh, you can have that one. I'm not touching him. I hate being with the human ones."

"He's not bad actually. Looks like he's with Arnie's girl though." The two continue their discussion as Mirasal pushes open the doors.

"Wait here." Mirasal says as she enters into a blanket of smoke, the aroma of alcohol and the raucous banter of the barflies seated at the black quartz counter. The vapor is so thick it obscures the dark blue walls. She covers her mouth as she quietly moves in between the maze of patrons, weaving her way towards the stairs near the back.

She stops in front of a large purple and black door at the top, just as it opens and a fairly young attractive Thykenian male exits. He gives

an acknowledging nod as he descends the stairs.

"He's very young." Mirasal says as she shuts the door behind her, the air in the small room filled with her Mother's sweet perfume that was a little too strong.

Arnamina, seated at the vanity, framed by oval lights along its edges, gazes at her daughter's reflection.

"It's just a client."

"So, not a potential new fasare, huh?" Mirasal gently ribs, repressing a giggle, her shoulders shaking slightly.

Arnamina turns to face her, her forearm resting on the back of her chair. Her sea green eyes are scowling. "Do you think you're funny?"

Mirasal's amused expression instantly morphs to something more grave. "No."

"Speaking of which," Arnamina adds hesitantly. "Have you heard from him?"

Mirasal gives a solemn shake of her head as she notices a small glass figurine of a bird and its eggs on the vanity.

"Was he here? Again? I told you not to let him in." Arnamina is glaring accusingly at all three of her daughters, each planted across from her at the table. Each looking flustered, fidgeting with their hands, exchanging glances. Aradea is trying to sign an explanation, the movements disordered, frantic.

"I told you," Arnamina points an adorned finger, it travels to each girl, lingering for only a moment. "I don't want him in here," the pronunciation of each word slow, drawn-out. "You disobeyed me."

"It was me," Mirasal stands, pushing her chair out. "He showed up and I let him in. We wanted to see him and he misses us-all of us," she straightens, gaining more confidence as she spoke, her hands flat against the tabletop. "He just wants to see us that's all."

"You realize what will happen to us if he keeps showing up here?"

Arnamina fumes, her painted claws burrow into the wooden slab of the table. "They'll come back, and they'll beat me and abduct you and turn you out and I won't be able to stop them. Is that what you want? Is it?"

"No." Mirasal tucks her head down meekly, shaking her head, mouthing 'no.' She squeezes her lids, as tears start to moisten the rims of her eyes. Arnamina immediately tugs her to her chest, nuzzling her face against her auburn mane. Mirasal digs her cheek against the blue silk of her mother's dress.

"Susa," Arnamina mutters against her daughter's scalp. "I just don't want to lose any of you, do you understand that? I tell you to do these things to protect you. Letting him back into our lives is a danger. I just want you to see that. I don't think you understand how dangerous he actually is."

Mirasal, head still nestled against her mother, stares off out the window at a small bird feeding its nest of offspring.

"Of course not. What brings you here?" Arnamina turns back to the mirror, placing her shiny silver brush down, rummaging through a bejeweled box, pulling out various earrings and necklaces set with gemstones.

"I want you to meet someone. Would tomorrow be good? Back home. He really wants to meet you." Mirasal replies as she inches closer.

At this Arnamina pauses her searching through her jewel box and turns back around. "Really? Who?"

"Robert Gray. He's...a friend."

Skepticism comes creeping into Arnamina's visage. "Friend?"

"He likes me that's all. He just wants to meet you," Mirasal takes a moment before she continues, twirling a tendril of her mane around her fingers. "I showed him your poetry."

Arnamina's demeanor softens. "Oh? Is he a poet?"

"No. He sells antiques. He's got a business. But he enjoys poetry."

"Is he respectable?"

"Yes. He's waiting for me outside so I have to hurry. But would tomorrow be good? Maybe afternoon." Her hand ceases its twirling and comes up to rub down the side of her head.

"Yes, it's fine. I'll be home. Now-" Arnamina rises from her chair, straightening her dark purple silk robe that matches the room's paint job. "Let's see him."

"What? Why?"

"Because I want to see what he looks like, that's all. Is there something you don't want me seeing?" she asks, stopping, hand perched on hip.

"No, it's just he's...I should mention he's..."

Mirasal trails off as she follows her mother as she approaches the window, pulling the floor-length lilac curtains aside to step onto the balcony. Robert immediately shoots his gaze up to give them a wave, mouth pulled into a wide smile, his golden irises bright and visible, even from the top floor.

Arnamina gives her own small half-hearted wave before stepping aside out of view, letting the curtains fall back in place and points. "Is that him? He's human?"

"No. Just looks it."

"How'd he know we were looking down at him?" Arnamina asks, clearly puzzled as she leans her head out to catch a glimpse of him again. Ever perceptive her mother was. She would, no doubt, have plenty of questions. Questions Mirasal may not be able to answer, given Robert hasn't revealed too much about himself. But it would have to wait.

"It's he's...I'll explain it tomorrow," Mirasal heads to the door, glancing back at her before shutting it. "See you then."

Arnamina watches her leave, the rush of air from the door closing gently blowing the wavy auburn strands of hair resting by her cheek bones. She peers down at the strange man again, brows tightly meeting into a crease.

He looks up and gives another huge smile as Mirasal meets up with him. They both give her a wave as they continue on. Arnamina retreats back inside and shuts the curtains.

"Well, you missed the two women debating about whether or not I was worthy enough to sleep with." he says.

"Oooh." Mirasal gives him a pat on his round cheek in a show of false sympathy, smiling.

He grins "It's okay, it doesn't matter. I know you find me appealing," he kisses her, a fast peck to the lips, before continuing. "I can already tell your mother isn't going to like me." He takes a final glance back at the city as they board one of the lifts taking them to the pathway leading up to the hotel.

"She doesn't know you. She's just cautious, I think the word would be. A little wary," Mirasal settles in her seat. "That's just her way. I don't think she really likes anyone, to be honest."

"Jaded?"

Mirasal contemplates for a moment. "I guess that's fair to say. It's why this might be a bad idea. A *very* bad idea."

"I said I can handle it."

"She's going to be a little...just...maybe ask her about poetry. That will work."

"Will do, but you'll have to read it to me, so I at least have some knowledge about hers." He gestures to the books mantled on her lap. Mirasal nods as she stares out over the horizon, the faded blue of the burgeoning sunset tinted with pink made for a beautiful sight. The ride back was peaceful, as both sat in silence, his hand on hers, at times a little jolt went through his fingers. When they reached the pathway it wasn't a long way to the hotel entrance. Anxiety burned through her as they approach the lobby. Busy as usual at this hour, no doubt the others were consumed with demands. She would do her part after a quick nap.

"I need a little rest," she says, practically falling on the bed, removing

her hat as she sheds her shawl, letting it drop to the ground. "Just a little. I'm so tired." She needed a rejuvenation.

She curls her knees up, planting her head against her pillow, her cheek buried against the feathery surface as Robert pats her back, placing his statue down by the nightstand. "Yes, you rest."

Its mind was just outside in the grotto, spotting two boys. Teenagers. Right near the cave.

Like sitting ducks.

Its eyes shimmer with sparks of luminous amber as a grin contorts Its face into something more threatening. It heads to the door.

"I'll be back soon. I have to do something."

18. Chapter 17

Chapter 17

"Because brothers don't let each other wander in the dark alone."

— Jolene Perry, *My Heart for Yours*

"C'mon! I'm dyin' from boredom here!"

Daniel had spent the last few hours trying to persuade his unadventurous twin to go cave exploring. They'd been wandering around the area around the grotto, and Daniel was utterly bored. Nothing exciting. His mother had gone on about the beauty of the area. "Paradise" was the word she'd used. But unless you're into trees and rocks, nothing to really experience. Yes, it was beautiful, but dull for the restless teenage boy mind.

The beauty wasn't really present, since some of the leaves and shrubs surrounding the cave seemed to be tinted a faded brown.

"C'mon, man!" Daniel pleads as he attempts to skip a pebble along the water, but instead it sinks down, causing ripples to form across the stillness of the surface. "I'm bored as shit out here." He kicks a stray boot out his way as he circles the water's soggy edge.

"What's that?" Carter asks.

"Some dude lost his boot. Now, c'mon let's go!" Daniel replies, beckoning him to the cave's entrance. A subtle breeze gently starts, cutting through the treetops, fresh leaves from their branches breaking loose and fluttering down to float atop the water.

"I told ya' I'm not gonna go in there. There could be bats!" Carter runs a frantic hand through his matted dark hair. Daniel turns and scoffs as he tosses a pebble at his brother.

"Dad said they don't have 'em here stupid!"

"Yeah, well there could be somethin' worse," Carter replies. "I ain't goin.' I mean look, it's gettin' dark soon!" he extends his left arm out

towards the pale blue and pink skyline. "We couldn't see anything, anyway."

"Got this," Daniel presents a lighter printed with tiny skulls from his back jeans' pocket, the only one his parents managed not to confiscate. He bends down to pick up a small stray branch. "And this. We'll see just fine." He sets the sparse leaves at the top of the limb aflame, reflecting the silver lettering of his Megadeth t-shirt.

Carter jumps back, as the flames grow in intensity, almost lapping at him.

"Whoa, dude! You tryin' to start a fire? Fuck."

"Come on! There's probably some cool shit in there! Don't be a pussy," he pauses. "The plan is, we just go in half-way and look around, that's all. Nothin' to worry about."

Carter's apprehensive demeanor dissolves into a more neutral one and he straightens up nodding.

"Okay, man." he chirps. The sudden, unexpected change in his attitude elicits a skeptical look from his twin.

"You sure now?" he asks, not trusting that this isn't a ruse.

"Yeah, let's go."

The boys head in the direction of the entrance, even Daniel seems to hesitate as they step inside, skipping along the stones, the newborn flames from the torch illuminate the cavern, revealing large stalagmites along the swampy ground, some much taller than the the boys' themselves. The inside wasn't without it's beauty; bright glass-like emerald minerals had formed along the roof.

"We're like Indiana Jones." Daniel declares.

"Yeah, right." Carter rolls his eyes.

As they venture farther in, Daniel's enthusiasm dampens. "I dunno man, this don't look too special. I was expectin' maybe somethin' more weirder."

Loud dripping, insects buzzing and the boys' footsteps along the mushy dirt are the only sounds to be heard as they journey deeper in. The stagnant odor of decay is so strong, Carter yanks his shirt up over his button nose.

"Man what died in here?" he says, trying to stay as close to the only source of light as possible. Daniel pauses, turning to face him.

"Remember? We heard those ladies in the hallway yesterday. Supposedly some kid went missin.' Don't think he's been found." They didn't relate this to their parents; it would have meant being trapped in that room the whole time.

"Yeah, forgot about that," Carter glances up to the ceiling. "Ya' think he's in here? I ain't seein' no little kid's corpse man. I mean that's definitely the smell of death. Remember what dad described it as?" Russell was retired from the police force and once described the smell as pungent with a bit of sweetness to it.

"Maybe." Daniel says nonchalantly as he positions the light to his left, casting pulsating orange along a group of large rocks.

"Those are cool," Carter thumbs at the green blocks of minerals above them. "Think we could reach 'em? Mom would like one."

"Yeah, just lemme grow a pair of wings first," Daniel taunts, slapping his twin's arm. "What's wrong with you? Dumbass."

"Just a thought. Ow, fucker." Carter whacks him back, triggering a back and forth of hitting and swearing.

Hee-hee!

Their shoving match is interrupted by the sound of a child's giggle. Clear as day. Both boys freeze, hands suspended mid-slap. A shivering silence follows as they hear the dripping and the buzzing, then...

Hee!

"Did ya' hear that?" Daniel's dark eyes are widening as they continue to hear the laughing, growing louder. And louder. Carter nods,

speechless as he inspects the area.

"A kid? Wonder if it's that boy," Daniel holds the torch out, zeroing in on a pair of stalagmites. "Think it's over there."

Just then, they see it; a diminutive head of blonde dashes in between the two formations, still laughing. Carter grips his brother's arm.

"That little shit is prankin' us!" Carter exclaims. The kid clearly isn't dead, but he's going to be. But that doesn't explain that awful stench that feels like its sticking to your skin. "Then what's that smell then?"

"It's just a dead animal probably. C'mon," Daniel commands. "Hey ya' little freak. Ya' think that's funny? Want us to tell your parents, huh?"

"They don't care." comes a small voice from behind. Daniel and Carter both whirl around as they see the child standing, arms hanging at his side, with a cartoon lamb resting on his belly. His face was in silhouette, but when he stepped into the light of the fire, two smoking black pits were present in lieu of eyes, like someone had taken a hot poker to the kid's face.

He looks down studying his feet. "I wanted to see the beach, but It killed me." He keeps his head down as he starts to choke and cough violently, tiny palm pressed to his chest as insects splatter to the ground in wads of thick mucous. The taller boys stumble back, Daniel, dropping the torch as the little boy runs. His feet splashing along small pools of water as he vanishes beyond the rocks.

"Shit, his face! What the fuck was that?" Daniel keeps his gaze in the direction where the kid disappeared. Scrambling for the light, faltering and almost losing grip again. He teeters his upper torso back, trying to keep his hair away from the volatile blaze.

"Let's go, man," Carter breathes, panicked. "Now."

Both boys run, almost tripping over the rocks splayed along their path, Carter's pants catching the pointed tip of a small stalagmite, tearing his jeans and sending him tumbling onto a bed of sharp stones. Daniel, with only one hand free, falls to his knees trying to pry him from the rock.

"Get up!"

"I'm tryin'! I'm fuckin' stuck!" The pain of the rocks pricking his skin through his shirt was sabotaging his attempt to free himself.

Both fall silent as they hear a loud 'whooshing' sound, feeling a powerful breeze hitting their skin. Getting closer and increasing in volume. Like wings flapping.

Large wings.

"What the Hell is that?" Daniel says, frantically seeking the air above. "What-" The sound is still approaching as it comes into view of the light revealing their pursuer.

A bat. A massive, monstrous albino bat. Far bigger than any human. Bigger than any animal they'd seen hiking the Appalachian. Red stripes streaked across its face, piercing its golden eyes that stared down at them with predatory intensity.

"Aw, shit!" comes Carter's high-pitched hysterical cry as he furiously continues trying to get loose. Daniel decides in a split second to just throw the torch down to help his brother.

Now the plan was to fucking run.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" he shouts as he manages to free Carter's leg, now bloodied, seeping through the pale tattered blue of his jeans. But just as they start to run, the massive bat swoops down, crying out as it seizes Carter up with its curled talons, digging into the soft flesh along his breastbone.

"Carter! No!" Daniel leaps off the ground as he runs along under his brother's flailing legs, desperately grabbing at the air before finally snatching Carter's red sneaker, which slips off in his hand as he trips and lands on his stomach, elbows painfully scraping along the ground.

He ignores the aches, staying put, hearing his brother's ear-shattering screams as the beast rips him apart, the sounds reverberating off the ridges along the roof of the cavern. He covers his ears, sitting up on his knees, sobbing as thick blood droplets hit his hair, trickling down

his forehead and arms in heavy streams.

In his periphery, he sees a watery blur of blonde hair; it's the boy again. Daniel, visibly shivering, turns to look at him as the blood continues down his pink blotchy cheeks and quivering lips. This time the boy's face is normal. He gives a wave with a dimpled pleased grin on display.

His brother's screams have ceased.

He's dead.

"You're going to float." the little boy whispers, hand cupped around his mouth, almost mouthing the words as the huge bat snatches Daniel up. He silently accepts his fate as the creature disappears above with him in its claws.

"Chiama Cartier, are you alright?"

Teora's worried features come into focus as the blurriness clears from Melissa's field of vision. Her still-damp hair is strewn along her forehead, a pounding in the back of her head, behind her right ear, as if somebody had taken a sledgehammer to her skull. She blinks for a moment, lifting her head at the bathroom door across from the foot of bed where she was laying on the peach comforter, dampened from her body. She bolts up as she suddenly remembers the attack. The door has no hole punched in it, no wood fragments, no evidence that it had even happened.

"I don't suppose you repaired the door while I was knocked out?" she asks.

Teora shakes her head. "Uh, no. No repairs were made. Tomah is downstairs in the kitchen getting you some ice. That's quite a bump," she points to the back of her head. "I found you on the bathroom floor. I'd come to deliver more soap, but when you didn't answer the door..." Teora leaves it at that, not wanting to add what was actually on her mind; fear that the young woman had gone missing like her friend.

"Ugh," Melissa puts her hand to her injury. "I must have slipped, I guess. Um, thanks." She gives Teora an appreciative smile, glancing at the bathroom door once again. Had it been a dream? There was no sign that Candy was here, or ever was.

Yes, a dream. It had to have been, but the anxiety she'd felt, the terror had been real. Could a mere dream produce such emotions? Perhaps the stress of Candy's disappearance, coupled with being in a strange environment was affecting her more than she realized.

Tomah comes through the room's door with an ice pack-which is just cubes of ice wrapped in a towel.

"Susa," he says as he offers it to Melissa. "I don't know why we don't have proper ones on hand. You should probably see a doctor to make sure there is no internal damage."

"No, no, I don't need a doctor. It's fine, that will work." Melissa assures as she takes it from him. "I'm not picky about those kinds of things. Whatever works, works." She smiles, weakened by her pain and confusion.

"We'll leave you alone," Tomah replies. "Let us know if you need anything." he offers as he shuts the door behind him and Teora, spying Melissa gazing at the bathroom door, ice pack to her injury.

It squats down on the floor of the cave, tearing an arm from the Muncy boy's shoulder socket. He'd influenced him to accept his brother's challenge of entering the cave The one that had been scared of bats. A fear not shared by his twin, but the sight of It in that form was enough to instill that fear. Had It allowed the boy to live, he would have had the fear permanently after the sight he had seen. Its sharp teeth ripped at the flesh of the forearm, sliding the bone out to toss it aside. As It continues Its meal, Its thoughts drifted. Drifted to something uncomfortable. A most unwelcome feeling, for sure.

What It was doing with her. Surely, It was not feeling any kind of attachment. Any feeling. No. No, that is not happening. It had not influenced her, as that would render the challenge of pursuing her pointless. And what a challenge she is. But, she was merely entertainment

for It. It had been curious about this woman, after her beauty had attracted It. The landscape of her memories fascinated It. Her thoughts peaked Its interest. The contrast of what was in her mind as opposed to her outer exterior It found intriguing. This mortal woman who had made It apologize to her, something It had never done in Its millions of years of existence. Never. Apologizing disgusted It. It felt the need to resist, but It had given in. It resented it, but It needs to not alienate her. It needs to appear normal. Such a relationship will take any attention off of It. No suspicion.

But that is all. Curiosity and necessity. And enjoyment. Enjoyment of her company is acceptable. Nothing more than that. It has no use for attachments. Or a mate. The idea had crossed Its mind once. Twice at most. Maybe even three times. But It was not interested. It preferred to be alone. Alone, but there's no harm in...fondness. Yes, that is acceptable too. It thinks highly of her.

But...

Surely It did not care? No, no, it is just fondness. And that is fine. Possibly even affection, but such a relationship cannot carry on, as It will only be around a year. And then It will sleep.

Another troubling feeling arises; how It will tell her. Tell her that the customary box It gave her meant nothing to It, the rose, the dress, and the necklace. The little trust It had gained from her would be shattered.

And It did not care. No, It did not. Affection, fondness and enjoyment are all acceptable.

But It does not care.

It gnawed away on a clump of flesh of a wrist-from which boy It couldn't tell-but then It pauses Its eating, a gravelly, gurgling growl emanates from Its throat, still pressed against the flesh and bone of the corpse's hand. Blood pools under Its tongue as It raises Its head, mouth open, bloody teeth displayed as a radiant blue light floated towards It out of the coal-black of the cave's inner depths. The light grew ever so brighter as it approaches, two golden pupils sparking just above it. A figure steps into view, his white beard and features tinted blue.

"Brother." Harold stands over It. He who was also created by the Other. The Other that had made his presence known during that time over half a century ago. That time It had learned a truth; that It was not alone. That It could feel pain, fear and anger. That white-hot anger that had burned like fiery coals within It. Anger being freshly kindled at the sight of the figure lording over It

Harold scoffs softly, irises twinkling in the pendant's luminescence, now taking on a more aqua hue as it swirled and shimmered under the glass holder. "Still using that clown form? The skin you used in the city made you look less like a buffoon."

"I thought you choked." It spits, tone venomous, a tiny bone sputtering from Its lips as It does so. It skids along the ground and lands square at Harold's feet.

He kicks it away with a black dress shoe. "I did. Trapped inside my shell. That universe caught in my throat, enveloping me, the black clouding my vision, my breath stopping, my life slipping away and everything went dark. But then, I saw it, a light. A blinding light that I drifted towards. I drifted until it grew. I fought it, tried to steer myself away. But it drew me closer, until it consumed me. My entire being. Then I awoke, very much alive."

Harold kneels down, somber mien near his brother's face. "He came to me. He saved me."

It stands, slathering Its blood-stained palms along the grey-white silk of Its suit. "That's the form you're choosing to take?" he chuckles, crimson-lined lips smirking derisively. "Looking like the old fart you are."

Harold stays silent before rising to meet his brother's contemptuous gaze, their matching eyes leveled.

"Taking on the appearance of a youthful man doesn't make one young, dear brother. You're as old as me," he stops, bristly white eyebrows kneading together as he continues, "But I see that form has served its purpose," he looks at the devoured corpses beneath them. "Does she know about your...preferences?" A knowing smile forms, his beard making it almost indiscernible as he nudges one of the

bodies with the tip of his shoe.

It glances away frowning. *Another uncomfortable feeling.*

"No," It growls. "She doesn't need to know." It gives Harold a side glance, Its heavy rasping breaths coming in droves, more pronounced. Harold shakes his head.

"A mother with young children. A child-killer. What do you think her reaction will be when-"

"Shut UP! Just shut up! She doesn't need to know anything and you'd better stay the Hell away from her! I saw that crap you tried to pull at the market today!" Its in Harold's face now, red soaks into the whites of Its eyes, Its voice firing off echoes through the cavern around them.

Harold is phlegmatic, closing his lids as the warm steam of Its breath rushes at him, spittle blended with blood splatters across his beard. He impassively reaches into his pants pocket to retrieve a handkerchief, wiping the saliva off.

"You know as well as I, what the consequences are. You've already received a warning. You keep up with this behavior..." he stuffs the handkerchief back into his pocket. "There will be no coming back again. Not for you," he looks to the pile of mangled limbs. "Lured them here and then killed them."

"That's what I do. I am the Eater of Worlds. I consume. I am destruction. I am death. I am what he created me to be," It takes a step closer, voice lowering, menacing. "He resurrected you, but tried to kill me, have me destroyed," It peers closer to Harold's face, until they are only an inch apart. "What makes you so goddamn special?"

Harold stands firm, quiet, only faintly raising his chin. It steps back, scoffing contemptuously. "That's what I thought," he gazes down at his unfinished feast, the air filling with the buzzing of stunebugs as they circle the bodies. "I can't change what I am."

"I have changed. I can feel it. I am still myself...but not entirely," Harold counters, his large thick fingertips coming up to touch his

necklace, now a soft lavender color, the specks of light swirling like a pool of water within its crystal. "I too, have anger, brother. Made a beam guardian when I asked for no such thing."

"You're still the weak one," It smirks, the dried blood smeared down Its chin already starting to crust.

"You underestimate me. A mistake you shouldn't repeat." Harold's inflection is enough to make It take notice.

No, It would not be intimidated by this, this old stupid thing.

"There is another way to live," Harold offers. "Different paths to take."

"All of which would lead back to the same spot. Now go. Get out of here," It returns to squatting on the ground, resuming Its meal. "The meat's going to spoil if I don't hurry."

"Disgusting." Harold's bearded lip curls in repulsion as he begins to walk off, back in the direction from which he'd came.

"Whatever. I'm eating. Get the fuck out."

Harold pauses, his back to his ravenous brother, hand on a rock. "You behave foolishly, he will end you," he doesn't turn around. "There will be no lifelight coming for you."

"I can take care of myself. Now *leave*."

With that, Harold steps back into the murkiness, the glow from the pendant shrinking, becoming smaller before being swallowed up by the darkness.

"Asshole."

It returns to Its feast, picking the bones clean before It collects Itsself and steps back into the skin of Robert Gray, antiques dealer. Teleporting to the back entrance of the hotel, under the discreet cloak of nightfall, straightening Its coat. Its mind is replaying the conversation. Its teeth clench tightly, grinding against each other, eyes squinted as It made Its way to the room. It keeps Its mind peeled for possible prey, but Its hunger has been satiated-for now. The stupid one's words, however, are embedded

in Its mind, making It more agitated. It swings open the door and there is Mirasal, awake and at the desk, looking at the rose.

It sneaks up behind her and coils Its long arms around her waist.

"Oh!" she gasps, spinning to face It as It jumps, yanking Its arms away, falling backwards against the dresser, eyes widened in surprise.

Wait a minute. Spectacles. No metal limb. Scent not right.

This isn't her.

The real thing comes into the room, holding a small serum bottle and a small oval black case. "Neseret I-"

Mirasal pauses when she sees Robert. "Oh, there you are," she approaches the desk, glancing between him and her twin. "Robert this is Neseret. She brought my serum." she smiles shaking the glass bottle, the red liquid sloshing around inside.

"You're Neseret?" Robert composes himself, coming closer. "Didn't mean to do that." He straightens his black vest and white collar. His cheeks swathed in patches of pink tint.

Mirasal's features switch to puzzlement as Neseret fills her in.

"He grabbed me. He thought-"

"It was me?" Mirasal's smile comes out again. "That's...a first."

"Yes, um, you two do look alike." A fleeting smile crosses his lips, taking note of the women's matching sets of azure pupils. Neseret considers him, gaze scanning up his tall frame, streaks of the lamp light flash across the oval lenses of her glasses.

"We're twins," Mirasal says, draping her arms behind her back. "Not identical."

"Yeah," Robert's tongue is in his cheek as he glances between the two women nervously. "Yeah, I see. So, a doctor, huh? That's...good."

"Grazach," Neseret gives a half-smile, before turning to Mirasal. "Um,

I can't really stay long, Caldoris and Tego are waiting-

"Caldoris. He likes to read, right?" Robert chimes in.

Neseret silently nods, smiling again. She speaks to her twin through thought.

Can we talk outside a moment?

Yes, we can.

"We'll be right back." Mirasal says at Robert as she follows after her sister.

"Buna diwas, Robert." Neseret flashes another smile as they exit the room. Neseret faces her twin, arms folded, a quizzical look sits behind her silver-rimmed glasses as Mirasal closes the door behind them.

"So that's him. Masare mentioned you'd brought somebody with you to the bar today." she says, looking to the closed room door.

"Yes, I'm taking him to meet her tomorrow."

Neseret grins. "She mentioned that too. He's going to need plenty of good fortune to survive that."

"She liked Imarito..."

"Yes, but not at first. And she still doesn't care much for Caldoris."

"Well, Robert likes poetry."

"That won't make any difference. Tego didn't."

"She'll like him I think. He's really impossible not to like."

"Masare always finds something, you know that." Neseret flips her fringe out of her vision. "Anyway, I spoke to Tapia..."

Mirasal's takes in a weary inhale. "What did she say?"

"That the medals rightfully belong to them," Neseret hesitates. "That

they belong to his family instead," she stops to give a disgusted head the ground. "That's all she said before she shut the door in my face."

Mirasal's mouth tenses, glaring at the red carpet of the hall. "Our girls are his family." Her nostrils start to flare as she continues to stare down the floor.

"That buga is irrational, always has been. But it looks like you should just forget about it. It will be a fight. His family-"

"But he meant them for the girls, he even inscribed their names on them."

"Forget about it. Just treasure the things you do have," another hesitation. "You know what they'll do. They'll try to take them away-"

"They're not going to," Mirasal spits. "No, no...they can't do this." she trails off, wiping her good hand down her face, the angry glower still there. Naseret touches her left shoulder lightly.

"They'll...make that claim again...that you're-" she stops as she sees hurt mixing in with the anger across Mirasal's expression. "Just let it go."

"They have to see-"

"They won't. They never did. But you won't win this. They will make trouble."

"They want to pretend like we don't exist."

"I know. It's just you need to let it go."

After a few moments of quiet sniffing, Mirasal gives a reluctant nod, shutting her eyes, sighing. There's a drawn-out pause. "Fine. You're right." Her black boot starts tapping as she runs her hand along the side of her skull.

Naseret gives her a gentle hug. "I have to go now. Tell Robert I wish him well tomorrow, he'll need it." She smiles, which Mirasal barely returns. Naseret gives her hand a squeeze as she walks away. Mirasal stays in place, watching her leave before going back inside. She

quietly strolls over and takes a seat at the foot of the bed, the gentle glow of the lamp hugging her frame as she sits still like a statue, hands in lap.

Robert is gazing at her, thighs resting against the desk, arms across his white shirt. "You need some time?"

"No I'm fine." she replies, staring off, eyes on the dresser across from her.

"So what's this about med-"

"No, I'm not talking about it. You know. You don't need me to say." she says, her body starting to rock.

"Alright, then. So...that was Naseret. It seems she doesn't know what to think of me." Robert steps over and sits by her side. The weight of his body on the mattress causes her to slope against him. He drapes an arm around her, but she flinches. He retracts it.

"She doesn't know you yet." Mirasal replies, still stone-faced.

"So, Naseret made that." Less a question and more a statement as he points at the medicine bottle.

Mirasal's stoic facade seems to loosen. "Yes, from a plant. She studies *malad panta*-medicine plants. " she hands him the serum bottle. "I told her about the rose and what you said about it being able to heal."

"She was interested?"

"Very much so, but I told her she can't have it." For a brief moment, a smile comes, but just as quickly is stolen away by a frown. Robert extends his arm around her again, this time there is no resistance. She relaxes against him, her body still tense, before letting herself go limp against his shoulder. "She's the smart one. Has both her arms, a normal brain."

"But you're smart. I told you before there's nothing wrong with you."

Lifting her head up, she scoots away from him. "You have to think I'm

a bit strange."

"No-"

"Why not? Everyone else seems to-"

Robert, without warning and with amazing speed, takes her cheeks in his wide palms, yanking her startled countenance forward only inches from his. Mirasal stares at him, stunned as he holds her tightly, irate rings of golden stare back at her. He almost looks angry.

"I like you the way you are," his voice is dripping with what appears to be a blend of both agitation and reassurance, dressed up in a growl taking root in his throat. "You shouldn't worry about other's judgement. There is nothing wrong with you. As for your arm, who gives a shit that it's gone. You're still gorgeous," he keeps his possession of her face in his hands as he continues, "I don't know what you mean by 'normal,' I don't know what it even is. But you are perfect the way you are. I think no such thing and I would appreciate it if you didn't tell me what I'm thinking."

As he finished, he gently loosened his grip on her. He gives her a small kiss along the stripes on her forehead as he slid his fingers away. She breathes, blinking, gaze glued on the edges of her boots. After what seems to be an uncomfortably long quiet, she turns her body to face him. Wordlessly, she leans against his chest, his arm enveloping her shoulders as she nuzzles her head against his jawline. They sit, staying in silence before she stirs.

"I have to do something." She heads to the desk and opens the small case, removing a small syringe. Removing the wooden cork of the serum bottle, she sticks the needle in, drawing out the red fluid. Robert rises up and approaches to stand by her side, hand on her shoulder.

"You can drink it," she says. "But I find it works faster just to inject," she pauses to glance at him, trying to focus on her task. "You don't need to watch."

"You don't need help?" he asks, touching her metal shoulder.

"No." she replies. "I do this all the time."

"Alright." He politely turns around as she slips her metal shoulder down, just enough to find a spot to stick the needle. As she finishes he turns back around to face her.

"Good?" he smiles.

"Good." She can already feel the numbness rooting through her shoulder, dulling the minor ache she'd been feeling.

"I have to go down to the dining room. To help." she says as she rises from her chair upon returning the syringe to the casing and placing the bottle on the desk near her antique radio. She gives him a quick kiss, as he slides his hands around her waist, pulling her in for a much deeper one than she'd intended. She pulls her lips back, slowly, gazing at him. His face now pulled into a pout.

"Don't do that." she frowns.

"What?"

"You know. The pouting."

He continues to give her an exaggerated hang-dog expression, his hands dropping from her hips, pushing his bottom lip further out. "I want you to stay here with me." His big golden eyes are wide, trying to convey innocence.

"I can't. I have to be downstairs. And that isn't going to work. You think you're cute? You're not cute." He's worse than her daughters.

Robert reaches over to grip her midriff again as he backs her up against the wall, his forehead pressed against hers. He brings both arms up to plant his palms on either side of her against the wallpaper.

"Your mind is saying otherwise." he grins as his lips softly begin to course along her cheekbone and down her long neck. She closes her lids, nuzzling her nose into his shock of copper hair before bringing her palms up to place them on his chest, giving him a nudge back from her. He raises his head to look down at her. That childish pout

has returned full force.

"We spent all day together." she smiles, touching his left cheek with her metal fingers.

The coldness of her prosthetic was a strange sensation, one It had grown accustomed to.

"I know." he replies as he brings his thumb to her lips, tracing it over them.

"I'll be back later," she says as she gives him a reassuring pat on the cheek. "You can preoccupy yourself somehow, I'm sure." She steps out from under his arms as he takes her hand in his, squeezing as she moves towards the door. She slips her fingers from his grasp as she exits the room.

"Yes," It says aloud, the dark circles beneath Its eyes wrinkle as It grins. "I think I can find something."

19. Chapter 18

Chapter 18

"Life is nothing without a little chaos to make it interesting."

— Amelia Atwater-Rhodes, *Demon in My View*

"So, you think it's that asshole?" Gabriel's plump frame is sprawled along the lower half of the bed, his hand rests on Kikara's calf as she sits, shoulder blades pressed against the wooden headboard. Her eyes are half-lidded, tired, contemplative. Her throat has a numb soreness to it from her sobbing.

"It coincides with him coming here," she quietly replies. "If you look at it. I mean, everything started when he showed up. And come to think of it, I don't know when he even checked in. I know I didn't see him," She runs her palms along her shoulders. "It's just strange."

"His name would be in the book," Gabriel says, "Have you looked?"

"Yes and it's there. But I don't remember seeing him anywhere. He just showed up. But I didn't check him in." She's always the one doing the guestbook duties, and he'd never approached the desk. Once in a while Teora would take on the task of signing in the guests, but with the strife between the two, she'd not inquired. Maybe it was time to.

"What about you, though? What happened out there?" she searches his eyes, hoping he'd finally offer an answer. His fear had only fueled her own about the situation.

Gabriel sits upright, not meeting her pleading gaze. "You know, my grandmother used to tell me ghost stories. La Llorona, El Sombreroñ and all that," he somberly gazes to the floor. "To frighten me and my little brother. She was very superstitious, always had crosses hanging around the house. Rosary around her wrist. But um, I never really... believed in that kinda stuff."

"You do now?" Kikara begins to crawl across the end of mattress, her hands disappearing into the thick material of the comforter. "What

are you saying?"

Gabriel looks at her for a fleeting moment, with a flash of embarrassment before looking to the carpet again. "I'm saying it may be-

"Palasma?"

"What?"

"Phantoms? Spirits?"

He gives a shake of his head, jaw stiffly shifting. "I dunno, I dunno."

"We believe they can't really interact with the physical world." she replies, perhaps as a means of comfort. Assurance that there is nothing there that he can't see. Whatever had happened, he was clearly spooked. And his talk of spirits was unnerving her. She felt her fur start to spike up, a chill throttle through her.

"Pacero, I need you to tell me what it was," she tries once again to pry any revealing tidbit from him. "You were so frightened, I just... I've never seen you look like that." Something had occurred outside the room's door. Something that had sent him running. Panicked. In all the time she'd known him, she'd never seen him so scared. Never saw fear in his eyes. He was fairly stoic at times, seeing him become a trembling wreck before her was jarring. His strength is what she'd admired, but now he was reduced to this quivering mess. His face was still bled of its color. It reminded her of the pictures of him that lay on the kitchen floor after they'd shot out of her heirloom.

"I can't tell you. But I think we need to look at the possibility that... something is going on-something we may not be able to just dismiss. I mean, I don't like that asshole any more than you do, but..." he shrugs, petering out, not wanting to verbalize his belief that the stranger couldn't possibly pull off what they are experiencing.

"Are we really at the point where we're talking about phantoms?"

"I don't know. But I think we need to look at all possibilities."

Kikara pulls in her bottom lip, swallowing the heavy lump that was

thickening in her throat. "Alright. I just wish you'd tell me what it was you saw."

"I can't. It's best you don't know." It would only add to her fear. And he'd have to explain it, what it meant. He certainly didn't want to go down that rabbit hole. In time, she'd have to know. Protecting her now was the least he can do, especially with the way he'd behaved earlier.

"I'll be back soon. It's time for dinner, I have to help, she exhales loudly. "I can't get terminated, so I have to work." She kisses him on the lips. Standing up, she heads to the door, giving him one last glance, a final silent bid for him to reveal what had happened, but no such revelation comes. As she leaves the room, the chattering sounds of the guests give her a sense of comfort. She never thought she'd be happy to hear the people talking, laughing, interacting as they made their way down to the dining hall. Gabriel had also been calming. In a way, his experience had helped her. Helped her realize she wasn't slipping into madness, that he was seeing things too. It was a tremendous comfort. They'd face it together.

Gabriel remains on the bed, staring at a large oval gold mirror on the wall as the lamp shuts off on its own.

Droplets of sweat begin to pearl at the base of his forehead as he continues to keep his gaze on his reflection."Sometimes they come back." he mutters under his breath as a vaporous image of a face manifests behind him.

Vicky Muncy stares out into the evening landscape, her hands fingering her string of soft pink pearls that were snug against her neck. The suns had set and her two boys had not resurfaced. Any sign of movement she sees out the window is met with a split second of joyful relief, but soon evaporates when realization comes that it is nothing more than a strange animal or bird.

The room was quiet, two small dishes sit upon the bed as the couple had went to the kitchen for a bit of food-biscuits that were a little stale-a few hours prior. Still unaware that anything could be wrong.

"They have to be out there still." she says, voice heavy with panic. But it's too soon to be getting hysterical. The storm clouds still lingered, leaving only the scent of the rain that seems to have at the moment passed. The thought that they were still out there in the dark. The unknown. Possibly hurt. Left for dead by some strange beast or something else.

"I'm gonna go look around. They couldn't have gone far." Russell announces as he heads to the door. Vicky rushes to his side.

"I'm goin' with you." she says.

"No, you stay here in case they come back." Russell urges as he exits, running into Radaha's tall lithe frame as he does.

"Pardon me." he offers, not looking at her as he makes his way down the corridor, his brown loafers squishing against the carpet with each step. Radaha watches him disappear around the corner before turning to the open room door to face Vicky.

"Um, dinner is about ready downstairs."

"My sons are missing," Vicky replies, holding her fingers to either side of her forehead, feeling a migraine starting to subtly throb. "They may be hurt somewhere."

Radaha stands mute, blinking as she fiddled with her thin fingers.

Not this again.

"I'm...sure they will turn up. Um, where did you last see them?" she asks. This wasn't her area; interacting with the guests. Mostly she just stayed put in the kitchen, blissfully unaware of whatever was going on behind closed doors. But now it seems with the recent events this is changing. And she has no clue how to go about comforting strangers when they are distressed, especially in light of what the possible outcome will be.

"A few hours ago. They usually don't wander too far. But I got a feelin' somethin' has happened." Vicky says, sniffing, trying to hold back tears as she brings her sleeve up to wipe the moisture from her brows.

Downstairs Tomah, Teora, Mirasal and Kikara shuffle around the kitchen in silence. Mirasal sorts out empty plates along the counter, actively avoiding Kikara. She could feel the heaviness of her gaze on her as she moves about, placing empty glasses by the dishes. Putting the whole blowout behind them was the best thing to do. Both had stepped out of line. She would make the first move. Pausing, Mirasal turns to her.

"I...didn't mean to hit you," she says quietly. "And if you bring it to me, I'll repair it."

Kikara gives an indifferent half-shrug, saying nothing. Mirasal resumes her work, sending glances back with an expectant look. She finally turns back around, leaning her palms against the counter.

"Don't you have something to say?"

Kikara stares at her with narrowing eyes. She finally gives a head shake. "No."

"Looks like Radaha can make something other than fish and tagro pie." Teora breaks in awkwardly, eyeing the roasted meat sitting atop the stove. Although from a distance, it looked more like a pile of mud in a pan.

Kikara merely nods in Teora's direction, giving her a barely-there smile. With her mouth pursed in disgust, Mirasal turns back around, roughly opening the drawers to remove silverware and napkins.

Tomah says nothing, keeping his back turned away from everyone, occasionally groaning. He'd had a word with Kikara in private. She was calm enough to work, seemingly more lucid than before, but he didn't have the time to question it. They had a job to do regardless. She certainly seems fine. Perhaps talking to Gabriel had straightened her out, but that was another matter; she was clearly breaking employee rules by fraternizing with a guest. Something will have to be done after this other mess is cleared up.

Mirasal turns to Teora with a bundle of silverware in her hands. She's the only one who seems to not be avoiding her. The others, she got the impression, were for whatever reason.

"The child, has he turned up? What about the parents?" she asks.

Teora shrugs, her expression shifting to bewilderment. "The boy is still gone. And the Dobsons...they've been in their room since yesterday. Haven't come out. Not even for meals. I doubt they'll be turning up now. I keep hearing them arguing in their room. And then chiama Swain-" she halts as her eyes dart to Tomah, who had decided it was best to keep quiet in regards to the mysterious predator around the hotel, so they'd simply informed the couple that they were investigating the boy's whereabouts, although a formal one hadn't been started. It had been met with stark indifference. As for Candice Swain...

"Wait-what about chiama Swain?" Mirasal asks.

"She's missing-" Teora sputters.

"It doesn't matter, she's just a prostitute. She probably ran off with a client." Kikara cuts in.

Mirasal shoots a glower at her. "Don't say that. It *does* matter."

"We think it was-" Teora begins.

Tomah loudly clears his throat. Teora's eyes shoot to him again and she gives a tacit nod. "Um, we think the boy ran away...somewhere."

"Nothing you'd be concerned about," Kikara says steely, folding her arms and meeting Mirasal's scowl. "Why do you care?"

Mirasal sharply inhales through her nostrils, eyelids pressing shut before she opens them again. "I *do* care, alright?" Something terrible has happened to the boy no doubt. Her grandmother will have to be informed and an investigation will have to be conducted. The missing woman, however, was news to her.

"Yes I'm sure. That's why you've been with him all day long doing Araseza knows what." Kikara sneers.

Gallivanting around while we're finding dead bodies.

She and Mirasal become locked in a fierce stare, oblivious to the

others. Teora and Tomah look to each other in preparation for a possible fight.

"You know, you haven't even come *close* to giving me an apology." Mirasal's teeth are now gritted, tightening her grip on the silverware still in her hands.

"We got an issue," Radaha bursting into the kitchen shatters the palpable tension twisting through the air. Her fingers are splayed across her heaving chest. "Came down as fast as I could. Those Muncy brats are missing."

"What?" Tomah sounds gobsmacked. "When?"

"Just now. Their parents are looking for them."

"They could find them still. Not officially missing." Tomah dismisses.

"The parents seem to think otherwise."

With a heavy blow of air through his nose, Tomah motions for the others to carry on as he pushes through the kitchen door, scratching his wrinkling forehead as Radaha followed. As they reach the Muncy room, Vicky is pacing back and forth, her teeth gnawing on her nails.

"You have to find them," she urges them upon approaching. "They haven't come back. Now they have a habit of gettin' in trouble, but they would never scare us like this."

"I'm sure they're around," Tomah assures. "They will turn up. They're just out exploring. It happens. Children get curious when they come here, but there's nothing to harm them."

Oh, but there is. The unidentified beast. No need to mention that. Yet.

"We'll head out later if they don't turn up-" Tomah begins as Vicky rapidly shakes her head.

"They wouldn't stay out like this and worry us-"

"You just said they have a history of doing this. And they've been creating trouble here," Tomah's tone is becoming lower, his lids slit as

he stares her down. "They've *been* trouble." So far the boys had broken one of the statues of the goddess Rykali on the second floor, got into a food fight in the dining area and created a mess, and had been caught snooping in other guests' rooms.

And their parents had done nothing to discipline them.

Vicky's worried visage slips into one of anger. "You. They said one of the employees yelled at them earlier," she shakes a finger right in Tomah's face. "And they said 'he,' and you're the only male workin' here. It was *you*." That last word is uttered with more than a hint of an accusatory tone. Tomah bristles at the suggestion, but adopts a more calmer less hostile lilt.

"It wasn't me. Nobody here did anything to your children. They've been testing our patience, but we did nothing."

"They said you were really angry at them," she turns her attention to Radaha. "It could have been one of you! You clearly hate us! All of you!"

"None of us did anything to your brats, lady." Radaha says as Tomah turns and gestures for her to stay silent. Vicky storms past them, shoving them aside with surprising strength for such a petite woman. She heads down the hall, turning to point at finger at them, tears are cutting down the pink hue of her cheeks.

"I'm gonna help my husband find my sons, then we're leavin' this fuckin' hellhole!" She furiously disappears around the corner of the hall. Tomah stands shaking his head as he looks to Radaha.

"Faca, this is bad. False accusations could mean termination." Tomah exhales, putting his hands to his slender hips as he hangs his head. He reaches a hand up to finger the dark blonde tuft of hair gathered near the base of the back of his neck.

"No, it's fine. You didn't actually do anything," Radaha tries to sound encouraging, but even she had her doubts. She'd lived among the Thycenians for five years now. They were, if anything, unpredictable. Violence was embedded deep into their tapestry. Her people had long ago learned you really didn't want to cross one. She liked Tomah and

has known him for three years, but still, she's not sure. She'd never seen him so agitated, not even with the most irritating guest. He'd always been fairly laid-back. Perhaps the job has finally broken him. That and he was ex-military, they are a bit more violent than the average Thyckenian.

"The fat bugra all but said she thinks I did it." he growls at her, not feeling much reassurance.

"All of us," she replies quietly. "She accused all of us. And she's right, isn't she? We do hate them."

"And we'll all go down for it," Tomah stares down the hall. "If Mirasal says anything to her ahauva." Having the hotel owner's granddaughter around was making this all the more difficult. Keeping this a secret would be impossible. And now the Muncys were going to make a scene, like that idiot Duchess.

"Let's go. We have to get dinner over with. Then we'll take care of... this situation." he orders.

"Maybe something will take care of it for us." Radaha jokes darkly.

Perhaps not really in jest.

It had lingered through the hotel, targeting various guests. It tormented a young woman about her mother's suicide. Imprinting her with images of her in the tub, wrists slit, causing strife between her and her father, who'd hoped the trip would mend their broken family. It had found a man with a secret alien lover, filling the man's wife with suspicion about the tryst. It had paid the Dobsons a visit. Influencing an argument between them, each accusing the other of being responsible for their son's disappearance. Mrs. Dobson coming at her husband with a knife, threatening him. He fought her off and left for the bar.

It was becoming more powerful as It basks in the chaos and fear It was creating. It now had a new stomping ground.

It has a new home.

Its attention is brought to Russell Muncy. Wandering aimlessly around the

grassy area near Its cave hideout, calling for his sons, whose carcasses sit rotting on the cave ground, what little there was left. It had seen his wife fight with the staff, making accusations. Ones that could create trouble for It.

It must rectify the situation. But merely influencing will not suffice. Time for some real fun.

"Russell!" Vicky cries out as she runs to him down the hill spotting his stark white button down shirt in the dark across the grotto. "Russ! Do ya' see them? Any sign anywhere?"

"No," he says, crestfallen. "None, nowhere. Maybe when daylight comes-" His police work should have made this easy, but here on this strange planet, he felt like a novice. The boys knew better than to vanish like this. An anxious, sick feeling of dread washes over his being.

Something is wrong, no doubt about it.

"That's hours away! It could be too late by then!" Vicky exclaims. There's wasn't anywhere for them to go from here, except the cave. Vicky and Russell exchange glances as a thought both entered their heads simultaneously. They both turn to look over across the water.

The cave. Of course. Daniel loves them. Carter, not so much. But if his brother had convinced him...

"In there," Russell points. "They have to be there. Nowhere else for them to go."

"Oh God!" Vicky chokes back more tears, nails digging into the hairy skin of her husband's forearm. "They could be trapped!"

"Ow, damn," Russell rips her hand from his arm. "We'll get someone. Don't worry."

Russell starts in the direction towards the hotel's back entrance when Vicky stops him. "They don't care! We have to go ourselves! Come on!"

"Vic, we need some help-"

"No. Come on you idiot. Now!" she yanks him back towards her, pulling him in the direction of the cave's blackened opening as the strips of moonlight bleed into the water.

"We have no flashlights," Russell says. "We'd be better off gettin' someone to guide us."

"If our sons can do this, so can we!" Vicky retorts. "We'll step in and call out to them, maybe they'll hear us."

Just as they enter, gazing around at the darkness, Vicky calls out, "Daniel! Carter! You in here!" Russell suddenly grunts loudly. His wife turns to him.

"Somethin' wrong?"

Russell's hand cups his full belly that protrudes slightly over his pants. "Ugh, I think I might be gettin' a stomach ache." he grimaces as he starts to hunch over. "Awww, damn!"

He crumbles to his knees, both hands scissored across his stomach. "Shit!"

Vicky dashes over to him, touching his shoulders. He rears up and strikes her with his right hand, knocking her back. She stumbles, landing with a pronounced thud on the dirt.

"Don't touch me ya' crazy bitch!"

Stunned, Vicky stares at him, a flame of anger snuffing out her worry and fear. "Russ, don't talk to me like-"

"Oh, fuck off!" he snarls as he keeps his hands to the pain increasing inside of him, like an ice pick poking at the lining of his stomach, intensifying with every word he said and every breath he takes in. "I told you I didn't wanna come here! Now look what you did to me!"

With that, he threw his head back and let out a trembling cry as that burning sharp pain scorches through his insides. Vicky starts to inch away, crawling back on her hands and feet as her husband continues his violent fit, stopping suddenly to focus on her, his bloodshot eyes about bulging out of their sockets.

"Look what you did," he growls as thick shards of saliva drip from his mouth. No trace of a southern drawl audible, his pupils lighting up pure golden. "Look what you diiiiiiiiiid-d-d-awwwwwwww!" Nothing could have prepared Vicky Muncy for the sight she saw next as Russell removes his hands, revealing a lump trying to force its way out. Twitching, moving, *alive*.

Vicky screams as it bursts, splattering blood and entrails around them, with but a few flecks hitting her face, the distance she'd put between them sparing her. Russell slumps over, limp, gurgling blood bubbles that pool around his mouth as his head touches the ground. Vicky's screams cease as she sees a small off-white creature with red stripes, armor like that of an armadillo, no more than two feet in length, with a long pointy tail thrashing about crawl out of her husband's gut. It keeps its yellow slit irises on her.

"Mom." comes two achingly familiar voices, laced together.

Daniel and Carter.

She turns to see both her sons standing side by side, near a stalagmite, doing a wave with their rights hands in unison, both with a strange smile across their features. They were both swathed in an odd green tint.

"We float, Mom." Carter says, still smiling eerily.

"We all do." Daniel adds.

Vicky's pupils do a tug of war between her beloved children and the tiny threatening creature only feet away from her. She shrieks as it comes full throttle, scampering across the rocky ground, leaping on her face, its tiny triangular teeth and small talons tearing at her pink skin.

Outside the cave, the wind is picking up, howling through the caverns.

The dining hall is alive with talking, laughter and the chiming of crystal. Mirasal, setting down a plate of food for one guest, an

architect who'd asked her about the structure of the hotel, glances up upon her ears catching that familiar sound outside. The howling of the wind shooting through the caverns. A cold shudder ripples through her as she sits the man's glass down, stopping herself once again when she starts to adjust the dish and position of the glass. A strange reaction indeed. But that sound had always frightened her. Things don't change, it seems.

As she returns to the kitchen, glancing over at the tall stained glass windows, the scant moonlight now subtly illuminating the colorful designs, she notices Harold seated nearby, back near the dining room exit. He motions for her to come over. She stops, watching him. It could be he needed her to bring him more food, drink, a napkin. Sighing audibly, she walks towards his table.

That necklace though. Robert's words about not looking at it played in her mind. She certainly didn't want to experience that sensation again. She, however, did want to ask Harold about it, what it was she'd seen and felt. Maybe it involved some kind of hallucinogens. But asking him would include actually speaking to him at length and she'd promised Robert she'd stay clear. As she halts at Harold's table, he motions with his large hand at the chair.

"Grazach, I'd rather just stand, if you don't mind," she folds her arms as she inspects his plate. Still full. Glass filled. Napkins. So, this is probably going to be about Robert. "Are you a mentay too?" she suddenly blurts out.

"If you're asking if I read minds, yes."

"Then you should know you are putting me in an uncomfortable position." She kept her eyes off that necklace, head raised, gazing off to the side. It was prominently sitting on his tie. She could see its flickering of light in her periphery. The urge to look at its beauty again was powerful. She hated the feeling. It was almost as if she was being hypnotized.

"I know and I don't mean to. But I also know he's told you things..."

"This has to be brief."

Harold nods. "I understand. He's put you in a rather precarious position."

Precarious? Whatever could he mean by that?

"I don't understand. You mean between you two?"

"Yes. He's not revealed too much about himself, has he?"

"No. I did just meet him."

"Well, more will come to light." He gives a mirthful chuckle as he raises his glass to his lips.

Mirasal's brows crease together as she stares down at him blinking. "What is funny about that?"

Harold raises a fleecy eye ridge. "Oh, it's just that 'light' has a different meaning for me-for us."

"Oh." She needs to end the conversation now, but her desire to know more about Robert was slowly overpowering the promise she'd made to not speak with Harold. At the spur of the moment she decides to sit, placing her hands on the table. She still averts her gaze from the gem, which is still twinkling. She faintly recalled Harold making an odd comment about it in regards to a universe.

"You see Robert told me..." she trails off.

"I know. I didn't intend for you to look into it. You did do that of your own free will, mind you. But it is lovely." he replies, tapping a large finger along the stone.

"Wearing it around your neck on display like that ensures someone will look at it." she replies.

"Touché." Harold chuckles.

Mirasal sits back, grumbling under her breath, looking off to the side as he continues, "You need not worry about it now." He tucks it beneath his tie.

"What is it?" Her eyes settle on him again.

"It's a talisman. A ta-rem."

"What does it do?"

Harold hesitates. "It's...a weapon of sorts. An incredibly old one," he smirks. "Like me."

"That's not a type of weapon I'm familiar with." Mirasal rests her elbows on the table.

"I have to say there is plenty you may not be familiar with." he retorts.

"Weapon against what though?" she prods. He really doesn't seem stupid to her. It seems Robert's assessment of his brother isn't accurate. She certainly doesn't know him, but he comes off as fairly intelligent.

"This wine is a little too sweet." His golden irises trace over the rim of the glass as he turns it in his palm.

Alright, he's not going to answer. "Where are you from?"

"All over really."

Mirasal frowns, drumming the table with her metallic fingertips. Harold eyes her prosthetic.

"That reminds me of Shardik."

"Who?"

He gives a dismissive wave of his hand, sipping his too-sweet wine. "Never mind." he says as he swallows.

She wasn't even going to bother, she's talked for long enough. She rises from her chair. "I have to go now. I'm a little busy, as I'm sure you know."

Harold nods again. "Yes. I must say though," he leans forward,

speaking softly. "Happiness is a like a piper than can lead one astray."

"Uh-huh." She turns on her heels and walks back to the kitchen, a smoky cloud of steam rushing out as she pushes the door open.

And she'd thought Robert was vague.

20. Chapter 19

Chapter 19

"Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most."

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

Hank Dobson sits at the bar, cigarette in hand. He'd quit ten years ago but started again a few weeks back. He clicks his lighter in his hand, his pupils transfixed on the tiny blue flame as Melissa Cartier comes and sits beside him one stool over. He gives her a passing glance as she settles in and orders a drink, adjusting her navy blue mini dress.

Hank slides the clear glass ashtray over as he moves to sit closer to her. He sniffles, bringing his fingers up to swipe them under his nostrils.

"Are you what I think you are?"

Melissa, chewing furiously on a piece of peppermint gum, lifts her cocktail as the bartender sits it down in front of her, her white pump clinking against the metal bars of the stool.

"That depends. If you got the money."

"I do. But I've never really...I mean I've never really paid...before."

Melissa spies his gold wedding band's sheen in the bar light. "Where is she?"

"Um," he glances at his hand, then her, flustered. "In the room. Not anywhere near. But uh—"

"You wanna do this or not?" Melissa removes her gum from her ruby-stained lips and roughly presses it to the side of the ashtray. "I don't have all night-and I'm sure you don't either."

"Yeah, yeah, let's go." Hank nods as he throws a few dollar bills at the countertop as they exit.

"You got a name?" he asks as they make their way to her room. Melissa gives him a passing glance. Guests were all piled into the dining hall, making the hallways and rooms devoid of life. It's where this guy's wife was most likely. He had some balls doing this when she was in such close proximity. But it's his risk. He'd be facing the wrath of an angry humiliated wife, not her.

"Viola." she replies. Candy had a habit of giving her real name at times, something Melissa felt was fairly dangerous. But Melissa knew better.

"This way," she motions him through the threshold of her room, shutting the door behind them. Removing her earrings, she makes her way to the bathroom. "Get undressed." she orders. When she emerges with nothing on but her lacy bra and underwear, holding the fluffy pink belt to her bathrobe, he's still fully clothed.

"I thought you were serious. Don't jerk me around here." she growls.

"I am. it's just-" Hank stutters as he moves to unbutton his shirt. Melissa shoots towards him across the room and grips his white shirt collar, tearing it open.

"Hey! Easy there-"

"Shut up." she snaps as she shoves him down onto the foot of the bed, the impact causing the heavy rectangular mirror above the headboard to shake. The wet spot where her body had been earlier now bone dry. She proceeds to violently yank off his brown trousers as he slides his hands down to pull off his boxers. She crawls over him, straddling his ample belly and grabbing up his thick hairy wrists, binding them to the wooden rails of the headboard.

"Whoa, this is-" Hank winces as she makes the final tightening knot to his left wrist. He begins to feel a numb tingling in both his hands traveling upwards to the tips of his fingers.

"Can you maybe loosen them?"

"No," She stares down at him, almost-glaring, her mouth purses as she wiggles her hips. "Just relax."

Hank shifts underneath her as she continues to gaze down. "I'm a little nervous here. What about protection?"

Kill him Missy.

Melissa slowly raises her head, level with the mirror.

Candy. Only now she looks fairly normal, save for blood streaked along her pale cheeks and crimson mouth. Her body bathed in a faint blue tint.

Kill him. Doesn't he look like that fucker who pulled a knife on you in Jersey? Kill him.

Hank stares wide-eyed up at Melissa as she shakes her head rapidly, sweat starts to form along his wrinkled brow.

"No, no. I can't," she pleads. "No, no."

Sure you can. Take one for the team and gut this motherfucker like a fish. In there.

Candy points down towards the nightstand. Melissa leans over and slides open the chestnut drawer, finding a large butcher knife with a black handle and a thick blade. She lifts it up, the sheen of the silver metal reflecting Hank's mortified features.

"W-wh-what are you going to do with th-that?" he stammers.

Kill him! Kill him! Kill him! Kill him Missy! Kill him!

Alongside Candy is another woman Melissa didn't recognize with dark wavy hair and a lavender-strapped dress chanting along with her.

In between them was a clown. Encouraging her along with them.

Kill him Missy! Kill him Missy! Kill him! KILL HIM MISSY!

Still staring at the mirror, Melissa's hand drives the blade into Hank's heart, delivering multiple stabs, cupping his mouth with her left hand as she delivers the final deadly blows. Hank writhes and screams, his

blood-streaked saliva dampening her palm. Afterwards, she sits frozen, gazing blankly up at Candy, Veronica and the clown all cheering and clapping as she stands up to face them.

You did it Missy! You did it!

She holds up the red stained blade, giving a weak, slightly deranged smile, her lacy white underwear now bled deep red.

Mirasal made her way up to her room with a plate of food, now cold. She didn't care though, she was famished. And with the way everyone seemed to be avoiding her, she was feeling more alienated than before. Her stomach flutters a little as she anticipates seeing Robert. His company was something she looked forward to.

After serving everyone there had been a physical fight between a human couple with the wife screaming at her husband about his "alien slut." Tomah and Teora had to physically separate them with the wife throwing punches and expletives with equal force. A young girl sobbing uncontrollably and being escorted out the dining hall by her father, and Mrs. Dobson made an unexpected appearance minus her husband, mostly ranting about how "rubbery" the vegetables were. Between all that, Kikara, and the frustrating encounter with Harold, she was done for the night.

Swinging her room door open, she sees Robert lounging against the headboard, her radio is blaring.

"Hey!" he smiles big, giving a welcoming wave of his hand. He's got a small brown bag of *something* in his hands, munching away. She approaches the bed and sits her plate on the nightstand beside a bottle of wine he'd clearly retrieved from the kitchen. When he could have done that, she didn't know. Whatever he had in that bag though, it smells good.

"What's that?" She sits down beside him, trying to steal a peek at the contents.

"Popcorn. Want some?" he replies, holding it out.

"Pop...corn?" She gives a quizzical narrow of her eyes as she reaches in, taking out some of the light, fluffy particles. She gives it a quick sniff before taking a nibble. Yes, this smells really good. Certainly more appetizing than her chilled plate of meat and veggies.

"Mhmmm," she gives him an approving nod, taking a handful more. "Good, what are these though?" She holds up a kernel.

"That's what it starts off as before you cook it, then it just kind of... puffs up."

"Puffs?" she giggles as she chews.

"Puffs," he repeats, popping the 'p' sound. He holds one out before tossing it into his mouth. "It's popular on Earth."

"I'm eating Eartho food?" Mirasal stares at the portion in her hand. If all Earth food tasted this good, she wouldn't mind some more of it. "Did you bring it with you?" She hadn't seen him in the kitchen, so he had to have heated it elsewhere. But where...

"Yes. It's my favorite actually." He almost looks like a kid with a candy jar, excited as he digs in and takes out another mouthful.

"Feels warm though." Mirasal reaches to touch the greasy brown paper with the tips of her flesh fingers. It had definitely been freshly cooked.

Robert suddenly jumps up as a lively song starts on the radio, tossing the bag aside. *'The warden threw a party in the county jail, the prison band was there and they began to wail, the band was jumpin' and the joint began to swing, you should've heard them knocked-out jailbirds sing.'*

"C'mon!" Robert yanks her up off the mattress by her hands, sliding one palm around her waist, with his other hand entwining her fingers with his. Mirasal laughs as he dances her around, twirling, dipping her, their laughter almost drowning out the music.

She glances at the wine bottle over on the stand. "Radaha probably wasn't too happy with you taking that." she says.

"It's a little too sweet." he replies.

"Harold said the same thing earlier." she pauses, hand quickly shooting to clap over her mouth.

Robert immediately lets her go. He stands staring at her, his pupils starting to show that familiar gleam of vibrant yellow, flickering, dying out before flaring up again. As if he's deciding whether or not to be angry. His hands come up to run through his messy auburn locks, jaw clenching as he sends his glower to the floor. He steps over to switch off the music, keeping his face down.

"Don't be angry."

He raises his head, his eyes now a golden-yellow blaze.

"He was in the dining area. I couldn't avoid him," Mirasal begins. "He didn't try anything, to hurt me. " She'd hoped pushing the thoughts of the encounter with Harold aside meant Robert wouldn't know. She hadn't felt him reading her mind.

Robert hotly steps over to the bed and sits, head hanging down again, elbows cradled on his knees. His chest is heaving somewhat, air loudly traveling through his nostrils as he breathes.

Don't get angry. Don't alienate her. The stupid one is lurking around. No longer content to just watch and observe. Intent on interfering. It isn't her fault.

He's silent for a few minutes, his breathing gradually slows. He finally lifts his face to gaze up at her. His eyes appear normal, smooth golden and calm.

"What did he say to you?" he queries, his raspy tone hushed, a cocktail of agitation mixed with a slight trace of disgust.

"Not much," Mirasal blows an exhausted sigh through her lips as she moves to sit by him. The frustration she'd felt earlier with Harold re-emerging. "Nothing at all, really." She crosses her legs, crossing her arms across her chest, shaking her head as she stares out into the bleakness outside the windows. Robert turns his body to face her.

"You're irritated." he states, giving her a curious tilt of his head.

"Yes well, it was an irritating experience. He either doesn't answer or he talks in puzzles."

"You mean riddles?" Robert is scowling, but a smile is inching its way out.

"Yes, it was annoying actually," she frowns as she straightens her back. "He doesn't...seem stupid to me. Annoying yes, but not stupid." Robert had been mildly annoying during their first encounter, maybe it runs in the family.

"You don't know him like I do." Robert turns his gaze ahead, the near-smile fading.

"I know, but...you shouldn't be calling him stupid." she says.

"I said you don't-"

"I *know*, but I'm not comfortable with you just using that word. I don't think he is."

Robert gives a low faint groan in response.

She waits a beat before she continues, "I know you're upset, but I didn't seek him out. He was just there. I did ask him about that necklace, though. He said it was a weapon, but wouldn't say against what."

Robert remains silent at this.

"...Weapon against what?" she asks more quietly.

Damn, that useless old thing. He's told her too much.

He had to have done it on purpose.

Inhaling loudly, Robert grips her shoulders, agitation presenting itself again. "It's really not anything you need to know about, alright? I know you can't discuss some aspects of your work, so you should understand. It's just something...he's involved in. It has nothing to do with me or you, alright? I realize that it being a weapon would probably peak your interest, but it's not something you need to know

about."

She was tired, hungry and not in the mood to pursue it. "Alright, then." she nods, bringing her hand up to his back, patting him.

"There's no need for that." he says.

"What?"

"That," he gestures with his chin at her arm on him. "I don't need any comforting. I know you don't like doing it."

She retracts her hand, pupils now directed to the carpet.

"Look, let's just forget about this, about him, for right now."

She gives another tacit nod, crawling along the bed to retrieve her cold dinner. She eats quietly before offering Robert a portion of the meat which he scarfs down and complained wasn't salty enough.

"I'll let Radaha know." she smiles while chewing, the mood now lightened.

"Tell you what, we'll go out for dinner tomorrow night, so you don't have to choke down this crap."

"I'll tell Radaha you said that too." she teases.

They carry on a conversation that pointedly avoided his brother. It centered more on poetry and her grandparent's artist friends, how the bar in the hotel was only added upon demand from tourists and her experiences with various unpleasant guests. She then heads to the desk and retrieves one of Arnamina's poetry books.

"Let's read." she says as they shed their clothes and slide under the covers with her back against the headboard and Robert tucked down beside her, head nestled against her shoulder, peering at the pages now on display across her lap. She starts with a poem titled 'A Revelation;'

Appears to be strength, appears powerful.

But his eyes are despair, soul mournful.

He wanders through dark, as he does not come out in day.

I am holding a moon up to light his way.

He boasts and he jeers, thrashes and cuts.

He repels me but draws me near.

Rejecting the light that is shone on him.

He believes he's a column made of stone.

Cracks form with but a single touch, crumbles to the ground.

A revelation.

As she finishes, Robert peers up at her. "What do you think is the meaning?"

Mirasal ponders a moment, giving a half-shrug. "This man appears to be strong, but inwardly he isn't. He doesn't want anyone's help it seems. He's not what he thought he was, or appears to be."

Robert falls silent, shifting his body. "So, he's strong but isn't. Arrogance I suppose."

"It seems. He finds out he's not what he thought he was. It's surprising to him."

"Mhm."

"Or rather *she* thinks he's strong, and *she* realizes he isn't. It's another way of looking at it."

"Huh, yes I guess so."

She continued reading. With each poem came a small discussion about its meaning, going into uncomfortable territory about what her mother's feelings or intentions were. Perhaps it's why she'd avoided her writing until now; maybe a part of her didn't want to know her mother's inner workings. To her she was this enigma; strong,

resilient. Not tolerating any nonsense. Maybe a part of her liked to keep it that way.

As they progressed, their attention became less focused on the poetry and more with each other. Touching, smiling, inching closer, longer pauses between page turns. Robert's eyes were fixed on her as she read, bringing his lips up to lightly brush across her cheek. Until finally he takes the book from her hands and closes it, crawling on top of her, sliding in between her legs, his mouth still pressed against hers as he began his movements. In the throes, her hands travel along his back, she pauses as she feels something poking out from his skin. subtle at first, then more pronounced. As she brought her knees up around his waist, she peers over his shoulder, eyeing strange glossy black prongs protruding out from along his spine. Spreading, stretching as he moved.

She keeps her gaze on them as he speeds up. As the build begins, she eventually turns her focus back to face, running her hand through his dampening hair, kissing him, until after they were spent, exhausting their bodies well into the night. She lay beside him as he slept, sprawled on his stomach, body turned away from her, buried into the pillow. She props up on her elbow, brows tightened together as she traces her flesh fingers softly along the pale skin of his back, his muscles flexing with her touch.

As she pulls her fingers away, he began to stir; growling softly into the material of the pillow, groaning, at times whimpering. His body begins to jerk, wince.

It can sense them coming, those hated ones, Its fear growing, the pain inside crippling, slowing It. It sees, with only one working eye, Bill Denbrough and Richie Tozier. the other hated ones are there and not far away, fast approaching. One, Ben Hanscom is walking up Its trail of birth and stomping the life from Its offspring. It sees them scatter, run for their lives as he chases them down and crushes them, one by one. Their cries reverberate through Its lair.

No!

It can feel a pain in one of Its legs, twisting limp from Its body. It weaves back and forth as It felt something burning Its insides. The poison one of

the hated ones shot down Its mouth and down Its throat was causing a searing pain.

"Let me go, let me go!" It growls, with as much fading energy as It can muster, blood bubbling from Its mouth. "It hurts!"

They stand before It, hands joined as It hears Bill Denbrough screaming, hurtling from the depths of the darkness. "Thrusts his fists!"

It wails as It turns to scurry away from them, leaving trails of black blood behind, Its fear and panic growing.

Robert's jerking movements were getting more erratic, tossing around the bed, clawing at the pillow case with elongated fingernails. His legs violently kicking as he growled and whimpered. Mirasal gingerly reaches over, trying to avoid his limbs, ducking back, pausing as she touches him.

"Robert, wake up, you're-"

Suddenly his hand shoots up, gripping her metal wrist, his eyes are open; glowing orange-yellow but different than before. The luminescence encompassing the whole of his sockets.

She gasps as he bolts upright, blinking as the scorched spheres turn to lock on hers. Her azure pupils clouding to a milky white. She sees a blinding light, her mouth slightly gaping. Her head quickly meets her pillow, laying on her side facing Robert, motionless.

It shook Its head, realizing It is not in the presence of the hated ones. It pinches Its nose ridge as It pushes the unpleasantness from Its mind. Returning to Its pillow, Its only then It notices her.

Oh, no! No!

Robert scrambles to snap on the lamp, nearly knocking it off in the process, moving quickly to straddle her and grip her shoulders, shaking them roughly. It touches her cheek, staring into her blank visage.

"No, no, no...!"

Exhausting Its efforts, It moves to rest Its spine against the headboard, perched on the pillow, holding Its knees against Its chest as It rocks, gazing down at her.

No, no. What have you done you fucking idiot.

Then, an idea occurs to It as Its eyes reach the desk. Crawling over her limp body, It approaches and snaps on the radio.

'A well'a bless my soul, what'sa wrong with me?, I'm itchin' like a man in a fuzzy tree, my friends say I'm actin' wild as a bug.'

Gradually, as the song progresses, the cloudy white slowly begins to drain from her irises, revealing the clear blue underneath. She blinks and stretches, sitting up, touching her forehead.

"Ugh, what happened?" she groans, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her flesh palm. "I've got a headache all of a sudden," She sends a glance to the desk. "Why is the radio on?"

"I was having a nightmare. I thought the music would help. I think I bumped your head accidentally in my sleep." he says, his face a mixture of remorse and relief as he moves to crouch beside her, rubbing her head.

"You had a nightmare?" she says groggily as she reaches for his cheek, massaging his cheekbone. "About what?"

"Just things that have happened, I guess. I thought the music would calm me."

Mirasal, giving a sympathetic smile, reaches over to drape her arms around him, patting his back.

As It returns the embrace, another entirely new and uncomfortable feeling rushes through It.

Shame.

All was quiet save for the sounds of the storm that was flaring up again. A mere few hours away from dawn. The Muncys had not

resurfaced since dinner. They most likely located their sons and left, but no matter, there are more pressing issues.

Like getting Heather Taggart's mangled corpse out of the building.

The lights in the lower levels have long been turned off as Teora, Tomah, Kikara and Radaha prepare to enter Heather Taggart's room. The rancid smell of decomposing flesh was becoming stronger, and they needed to hurry before more guests noticed. They'd already received complaints from two in the adjoining rooms. Good thing the Muncy twins were gone; they could have sneaked into the room and discovered the secret carnage and all Hell would have broken loose.

Kikara is almost hyperventilating as they near room forty-three. Tomah puts his hand to her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You can just stay out here if you want. We need someone to keep watch."

"No, I'm fine. It's just...let's get it over with."

As Radaha opens the door, with more than a hint of hesitation, Tomah withdrew his small flashlight as they enter, hands over noses to block the stench, switching on the lamp. Kikara gazes down at the bloodied sheet still covering the torso. Her heartbeat is hammering against her chest cavity as she stares at it.

Same spot it had been. Like it had never moved.

But it did. It did. She was certain of that.

Tomah's touch causes her to jump. "You alright now?" he asks, peering around her shoulder to search her eyes. She silently nods.

"It's just it looks like it...never mind."

"Well," Radaha breaks in. "If this thing doesn't get up and start dancing, I'm going to be really disappointed," she chortles, stopping when she sees Teora giving her a disapproving glare. "What's that look for?"

"Why are you joking about this? She's *dead*."

"I know she's dead, you don't need to tell me that. It's not like she can hear." Radaha scoffs, giving the body a small kick. "She's got no ears now."

She chuckles but pauses when Teora continues to scowl. "What?"

"It's not *funny*! The woman's dead!"

"I know she's dead!"

"Well show some respect!"

"And what respect did she show? Why do you care, huh?! You said she treated you like kutta!"

"But I didn't want this!" Teora sounds near tears, arms spread out.

"Oh come now! You-"

"Shut it!" Tomah erupts through gritted teeth. "Can we get this done already? We have to take it all the way out and dump it off the cliff. That's a distance, so can we get going?"

Teora and Radaha exchange dirty looks as they proceed, with Teora offering, "Maybe we should just bury her. It would be easier." Doing this did not sit well with her at all, but doing what she deemed the right thing is not an option right now. Not with the risk of losing their jobs and a scandal.

Tomah shakes his head. "No, the animals would just dig her up. We'll toss her off into the river, it will take her down stream and the animals will get her there. They'll consume what's left." Teora covers her mouth at this mental image as they gather up the torso, wrapping it tighter in another sheet as they carry it out the room and down the hall, each wearing rubber gloves. Teora and Tomah along with Radaha take on the burden of actually carrying her. Kikara lingers back, with Tomah sending concerned glances back at her.

"What was this woman eating? It's like carrying a boulder." Teora grunts as they reach the top of the stairs.

Just then there is a click of a door near the end of the corridor. They

all freeze, bloody bundle rested on their arms. Staying still, the faint low rumble of thunder drowning out their panicked breathing as little Emily Gravatte stood, knuckling her eyes with her left hand, her right clutching her small teddy bear, its big red ribbon around its neck concealing most her arm. She straightens her purple polka-dotted nightgown as she observes them. She was a new arrival with her mother just this afternoon.

"I'm scared. The storm," she whimpers. "Mommy is asleep right now, but I'm scared. She told me to start counting when you see the lightning, and if I count higher each time 'till the thunder, that means it's going to go away," she explains, tightening her palms on her tiny friend. "But I'm still scared."

Kikara runs to her, kneeling by her side, giving a knowing nod over her shoulder to continue as the others take heed and haul the torso downwards to the bottom, scurrying past the rooms near the back entrance.

Kikara turns back to Emily and quietly leads her back into her room. The girl doesn't seem to be curious as to what they had been doing. Then again, she's only around six years old. She places her back into the bed, with her mother occupying the other. Oblivious that her daughter was even up.

Tucking her in she assures her, "Nothing can hurt you. It's just a storm. Do what your masare asked and count."

The girls nods, clutching her toy to her cheek as she snuggles under the sheets. A flash of lightning outside the circular windows briefly paints the girl's face in pale white-blue. "Al-alright. but that..." she points at a huge tree just outside the window. "It's watching me."

"No there is nothing. I assure you. So go back to sleep alright? It's a tree nothing more." That tree was supposed to have been cut down, as it blocks the view, but they'd never gotten around to dealing with it. It was thick with twisting crooked branches, not as aesthetically pleasing as the rest of the scenery. She gives the girl one last bit of encouragement before she leaves.

She quietly makes her way out back to catch up to the others.

Together they make their way further past the forest, fighting against the pelting rain, with Tomah hitting his ankle on a large rock and Teora nearly stumbling over a cluster of fallen branches blown down by the wind until finally they reach the mountain's edge.

"Let's unwrap her." Tomah orders as he and Radaha remove the sheet.

"We'll burn this." Tomah says as he tosses it at Teora, who still looks sickened.

Lifting the body, they toss it off the side. The sounds of its mangled flesh splitting against the sharp rocks is heard as it falls.

All four stand looking out over the edge, the wind cutting through them, icicles shivering along their bodies. Kikara continues to stare down at the murkiness below, relief writhing over her. As the others start to wander back, Kikara motions Teora over to her. Teora hesitates for only a moment, before approaching.

"Tell me," Kikara queries, folding her arms tightly across her chest, her body starting to quiver. "Did you sign in *chiamo Gray*?"

Teora's brows knot together in rumination, before she gives a minor head jolt, blinking. "Yes," she says, looking off, continuing to bat her lids. "Yes, I did."

"...Are you sure?" Kikara lifts a skeptical brow.

"Um, yes, yes. I did. I'm sure." she begins to walk away, before she turns and motions for Kikara to follow. They both walk side by side in the direction back to the hotel.

Back in her room, little Emily sits up as lightning shreds across the sky outside. She gazes at the window, tightly clutching onto her bear as she sees an enormous branch tapping against the glass, the bark of the tree seeming to possess two yellow beaded eyes and a strange red, twisted mouth.

Tugging the blanket over her head of soft brown curls, she squeezes her eyes shut and starts to count.

"One, two, three-"

Smash!

The branch crashes through the window in a hurricane of rain and splintering glass, the curtains being torn away as Its branches crawled and twisted towards Emily's bed like a group of writhing snakes. Yanking her from beneath the covers by her foot, It dangles her upside down as she screams, her bear tumbling to the floor. Her mother jolts awake, shrieking at the sight as she runs to the window.

"Oh my God, Emily!"

It could see the mother awakened, frightened.

Two birds with one stone.

Moving with slithering speed, a vine-like branch whips forward and snatches up Ms. Gravatte, coiling around her neck. It drags her towards the window, screaming and kicking the air with her legs, trying to rip away the branch, creating bloody slashes along her hands. It lifts them high above Its gaping misshapen maw that's pulsating orange-yellow, filled with rows of sharp teeth. It drops them in, swallowing them whole.

It did not need to satiate Its hunger, but this was a way to alleviate the new feeling of shame. Distraction from the awful sting of that new emotion. But even as It made Its way back to the room, draping Its arm over her as she slept soundly, It still felt it as It pulls her near It tightly.

"I'm sorry." It whimpers against her back.

21. Chapter 20

Chapter 20

"Once you drop a mask, you can never wear it again."

— Ljupka Cvetanova, *The New Land*

Mirasal awakens, she instinctively reaches over to the nightstand for her prosthetic, only to be met with the feel of the table's wooden surface. She bolts up, panic igniting.

"Where is it?" she tosses the covers aside, her one limb coming up to touch her head that still throbbed, her eyes scanning the room. She's certain she'd left it on the stand. There's nowhere else for it to be.

"Here," comes Robert's voice from behind her, standing beside the bed, holding out her metal arm. "I got it cleaned and polished for you."

Mirasal blinks away the sleepiness from her eyes as she crawls along the mattress, taking it from him. She stares at its fresh sheen as Robert remains standing, arms tight to his sides, fingers twitching, watching her reaction.

"Um, grazach." she says as she slips it on. "It needed it. I usually take it to-"

"That place in town, near the dress shop." Robert finishes.

"Yes. You went all that way?"

"I got up early."

"Well, I appreciate it."

There's a moment of silence, adjusting her arm, before she continues. "My head still hurts. You must have gotten me good last night," she chuckles softly. "I used to share a bed with Naseret when we were really little and she used to kick me in her sleep all the time, so don't feel bad about it. It was an accident."

"I know," he says, his eyes cast downwards. "I really didn't mean to."

"It's fine."

She heads to the bathroom to draw her morning bath with Robert glued to her side, bumping against her as he tries to enter through the doorway alongside her. He immediately moves to switch on the water.

"I can do that. You can go and do something else if you-"

"No, no. I want to stay."

She lounges with her head against the rim of the tub as he massages shampoo through her mane, his sleeves rolled up. Quiet and attentive.

"Something the matter?" She peers up at him. "You seem quiet." He hadn't really spoken the whole time they were in here. The previous day's experience at the market told her this wasn't good. He didn't seem like he was still angry about the encounter with Harold.

"Nothing really, just, um, thinking."

"Mhm. I had the strangest dream last night." she says as she inches farther down, kneecaps breaking the water's surface.

Robert pauses his movements, saying nothing.

"It involved a roomful of glass windows shattering, and then people screaming and running around. It almost looked like the dining room of the hotel. It was just very strange," she reaches a finger up to wipe a stray drip coursing down her forehead. "Wonder what it could mean?" She's not one to put too much credence into deciphering dreams, but it had been so random. The details of it however, were blurry and she had mostly forgotten some of the other parts. She could have sworn Harold had made an appearance. Perhaps it was influenced by the tension between him and Robert and her being caught in the middle of it.

Robert resumes washing her, shrugging it off. "Probably nothing really. I don't think dreams mean anything."

"What was yours about?"

"Um," he halts his hands again. "Just nothing really. Can't really remember it now."

"Could have been that cold meat we ate last night."

"That would give anyone nightmares."

She playfully flicks water droplets up at him, before she dunks her head down to wash all remnants of the shampoo from her scalp. As she rises from the water, he wraps a towel around her shoulders.

She gives him a quizzical smile. "I *can* do that you know."

"I know. But the towel was right there." he replies, rubbing her back, handing over her prosthetic. He attempts to attach it, before she brings her hand up to touch his wrist.

"No no. Really it's fine. I can do it."

As they walk into the room, with Robert still stuck to her side, she drops the towel and dresses. As she's putting a thick gold multi-layered necklace around her neck, she approaches the desk.

"That reminds me," she pulls open a drawer and removes a medium-sized single barreled gun, Its metal somewhat spotted and dull, with bright blue highlights along the steel. "I should clean this." She pulls her chair out and sits as she reaches in to remove a small rag and bottle of liquid from the same drawer.

"You have a gun here?" Robert moves to stand by her, staring down as she starts removing a side compartment containing a row of fairly large bullets. She lines them up along the desk in a neat line. Each one printed with a circular red symbol.

"You didn't know, huh?"

Robert shakes his head. "No, I actually didn't."

"Well, it's not something I think about. I just keep it locked in the drawer. I bring it everywhere. We're advised to carry them with us,"

she smirks up at him. "Seeing how the guests tend to get, it's not a bad idea," she chuckles before she continues, "I haven't used it too much, but we're allowed to take them home with us when not on duty. It's encouraged." Yesterday, in her agitation, she'd forgotten it when they'd gone to the marketplace.

"Why?" Robert inquires. He eyes the weapon with curiosity.

"Someone in my unit was killed when off-duty and he wasn't armed," she quietly elucidates. "He was a friend of mine actually. Since then, we are required to have them with us at all times." She has no issue with having it in her home, keeping her daughters away from it was her main concern.

"So," Robert reaches for it. "Are you going to teach me?"

Mirasal pulls it back just as his fingertips brush along the barrel. "No. Why would I?"

"C'mon, I want to-"

"No. Absolutely not. It's not a toy."

Pouting, he reaches for it again. "Oh come on!"

"Oh stop that, it's not going to work. I mean it. This isn't mine. It belongs to the military. It's not for civilians to treat like a plaything. You can hurt yourself if you don't know how it works."

"I'll be careful-"

"What if you shoot your finger off? Then where would we be? The nearest hospital is-"

"That's okay. I can just grow out a new one."

Mirasal shakes her head, smiling. "I'm not joking. These are not like the guns from Eartho. Have you used one? I guarantee they're not alike-"

"I'm not either."

Mirasal loads the cartridge back up, placing each bullet in carefully, clicking it in place. She glances up at him, expecting him to be grinning. But no, he's got a look of utmost seriousness. She pauses her movements, watching him. There's a drawn-out beat of silence before she places the gun down on the desk to gaze up at him.

"I can do that...really." he says in a whispering tone.

Mirasal gawks at him, blinking. "You're... not joking?"

"No."

"Wait...so you can-"

"Grow out a new limb." he finishes speedily.

Mirasal cradles her elbow on the back of the chair as she turns her body towards him, eyes widening. "You can *grow out* a new limb?"

Robert simply nods, that visage of sincerity not dropping. She couldn't tell if this was real or not.

She continues to stare at him. "You can *do* that? You're serious?"

Robert kneels by her, taking her cheeks in his palms. "Look, remember when I said it's good to be open to things?"

She silently nods, eyes still surprised. Robert smiles. "Alright. I need to show you something, okay?"

"Alright." she breathes with more than a bit of concern.

"Here," he says, taking her by the hand as he leads her out the room. "Come with me."

Standing under a canopy of trees out in the grotto, he's looking down at her as they face each other. The rain has stopped, but the storm clouds still lingered. Seems like it wasn't passing over yet.

"I want to make sure we have some privacy here." he says as he peers around them. The area they were in was tucked away out of view of the hotel, near the water's edge. It was quiet, serene. No birds are

chirping, no nearby animals making their usual noises. Just a complete unnerving silence.

Mirasal fiddles with her fingers, her toes squirm under the straps of her sandals. "We're alone I'm sure." She was used to him being playful, pouting, teasing. This grave demeanor he was wearing was a little troubling. She'd seen it yesterday at the marketplace, but this time seems different.

Robert takes in a deep inhale. "Promise me, that you won't get scared."

She stares up at him. Such promises can never really be made, but she gives him a barely-there nod.

"Remember you have to trust me." Robert begins to take steps backwards, not tearing his golden spheres away from her as he reaches a tree, placing his hand on it, he steps behind the trunk.

A boot with a red pompom emerges out the other side, languidly at first. Then a white gloved hand shoots out, fingers wiggling. There's a pause before his whole body steps out from behind. Mirasal gasps as she stumbles back, the heels of her feet almost catching the water's edge as she stares, metal fingers to her mouth, eyes as big as saucers, unable to tear her gaze away from the sight.

It was the clown doll standing before her, at least it looked like it; same ruffles adorning the neck, same ruby face paint, his auburn locks tinted a more vibrant orange. He was a little taller, his forehead strangely elongated, bulbous. Pompoms akin to the ones on his boots sat along the front of his off-white suit. As he moved, she heard bells jingling.

Nothing was familiar about this being until he did a drop and somersault across the ground, leaping up to stand right in front of her and she got a look at the eyes thickly outlined in black. That same liquid gold gazing down at her.

This is him. This is Robert.

"Say something?" he says in a voice much raspier, with a more

pronounced lisp. The same inflection she'd only heard bits and pieces of in the marketplace. Heard only the smallest hint of last night. When she finally regained composure, her metal hand drops.

"You look like the doll." she says, her stunned voice low, eyes still huge.

He smiles, displaying more pronounced buck teeth. "What do you think?"

"Why...do...you look like that?" she queries as she inspects him, flesh hand coming up to lightly touch his ruffled collar, pompoms and the soft silk of the fabric of his suit. She fingers one of the small bells dangling from his wrists.

"I can take on any form, this is just one of them. I can shift."

"Yirg-a shapetaker?" she replies, barely a whisper. She'd heard legends that she never paid any attention to; stories about beings that could change their form at will, whether to be something appealing or terrifying.

But they didn't actually exist. They were myths. A story to be told to children around a fire to frighten them. Nothing more.

But there's one standing before her now. Of all the human-passing beings she'd met, there were always little things that revealed they weren't human; long lizard-like tongues, pupils like those of a reptile or pointed ears. But never had she encountered someone who could change their form at will right before your eyes. This is an ability associated with otherworldly creatures. The Gods and Goddesses.

It was almost like...magic. This is something on another level than his illusions and parlor tricks.

"This one is called Pennywise. It's my favorite, actually." he offers as he adjusts the ruffle.

"Why?"

"Because I just like clowns," he grins. "They always have popcorn." He begins to do cartwheels along the grass. He remains standing on his

head in the middle of one to look up at her grinning, his long legs keeping their balance in the air.

"So, were you a performer?" she asks as he rises up to face her, the chiming of his bells breaking the silence encompassing them.

"You could say that."

Curiosity begins to smother whatever apprehension she is feeling and she boldly reaches her good hand up to touch his crimson nose, trickling her fingertips along the matching lines that stretch to his forehead, connecting to his mouth. He closes his lids as she traces along his lips, feeling the warmth of his breath.

"So, if I wanted you to be a fish, you could be a fish?" she asks, gesturing for him to tilt his head so she can brush her fingers through his orange tuft of hair.

He grins again. "I'm just getting started here."

He gets a running start before he does a cannonball into the water. The surface ripples and bubbles before a large white fish emerges, leaping up and down, flapping its clear fins, displaying the red zebra-like pattern down its back. Mirasal slowly approaches, the faintest hint of a smile forming as the fish continues jumping up from the water before it finally lands on the grassy edge. Its body starts convulsing into a blob, its fins becoming elongated, stretching out from its sides, feathers bursting through the scales of its skin. The snub end of its face curving and developing a red pointed beak as its stripes spread out along its newly formed wings.

Mirasal's hands are pressed to her mouth as she watches this process. She finally inches closer, kneeling down, reaching her fingers forward to gently run them over the bird's soft head and down its long neck. She jumps as it suddenly squawks, expanding its wings. She sits back and watches as it takes off, gliding in a circle overhead, before diving down and in a rustle of leaves vanishes among the treetops. There's a cracking of branches and twigs as she sees the tall skinny tree trunks bending in response to something large moving in between them.

"Holy crousa..." she mutters as a large snowy white thyacosma with

crimson vertical stripes down its back appears, stepping out into the clearing where she stood. It slowly saunters up, its mouth, however obscured by its saber-tooth teeth, seems to be smiling. She stays frozen in place, mouth hanging open, taking in shaky breaths as it nuzzles her cheekbone with its snout. Closing her lids, her hands eventually come up to stroke its long head, tracing the silky fur along the top, trailing her fingertips along the three rhinoceros-like horns protruding out the top above its nose. She takes its head between her palms to meet its golden pupils.

"It's you in there." she says, continuing to glide her fingers along the outline of its snout. It suddenly steps back and begins to rise up on its hind legs, letting out a roar as it trembles, its face shrinking back down, horns retracting into its skull. The limbs becoming smaller, thinner as it shrinks back into Robert. He gives a shake of his head as he steps forward towards her, a grin erupting as he adjusts his black vest and white dress shirt.

"So, what do you think?" he queries as he stands before her, looking somewhat nervous. She reaches up to cup his cheek, lips pulled in as she studies him.

"What...do you look like then?" she asks as she grips his chin gently, turning his head either way.

"I look like this," he replies, pointing down at his torso. "This...is my true form. I can just take on different ones. But this is what I look like."

She had glimpsed It last night. Its true form peeking through the barriers of Its material form. She can't handle it. She can barely handle seeing It shift. It cannot fully reveal Itself, but small revelations are acceptable. No harm in that.

"What you said about being able to grow out a new limb-ah!" She jumps back as his right hand jets up in front of her face, his pale skin taking on a grayish hue as it morphs into a knife. She hesitantly reaches up to touch it, but recoils back quickly.

"Yes," he holds out his left hand and carefully slices off a thin piece of the tip of his index finger as she audibly gasps. "I can." He holds it up

to her as she comes closer, widened eyes focusing on the new skin starting to form in threads over the wound, like a tiny spider spinning a web. Slowly but surely growing back. "It will take awhile to grow back completely, just a few days." he says, wiggling the affected finger.

Mirasal stares at it until her gaze is drawn back down to his other hand, now normal again. She reaches down and takes it in her palms, massaging the skin. Before long, however, she lets it drop to his side, sighing loudly, her breath visible in the chilled morning air.

Her face drops to her hands. "This, this is..." she shakes her head as she glances back up. "A *lot* to take in."

"I know, I know. I wanted to show you. For you to see," Robert touches her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. "I didn't want you to be afraid."

"I'm not-"

"You are a little."

"It's just this is new. I've never seen this before. It shouldn't be possible," she continues to shake her head. "I don't know what to think."

"It's just something I can do. It's part of me. Who I am. There's nothing to be afraid of. You have things that are a part of you. And this is mine."

She remains silent. Robert gives her shoulders a gentle shake.

"Alright?" He peers down at her face.

Mirasal meets his pleading mien before she lowers herself onto the grass, sitting on her knees, sighing heavily. Robert crouches down by her. She's silent for a few minutes, staring off at the water before she replies, "Alright, I'll get used to it, I suppose."

Harold had told her there were things she may not be familiar with. Perhaps this is what he meant.

The kitchen was quiet, save for the sounds of Radaha cooking at the stove. Tomah, Kikara and Teora came and went from the dining room as the guests chatted among themselves. The unspoken agreement that was made the night before still hung over everyone, and very little was being said.

"Wonder where the Muncy family are?" Radaha asks no one in particular.

"Who cares, they're gone." Tomah mumbles as he heads back out the kitchen door, almost knocking into Kikara. Her dreams the night before were filled with images of that woman's mangled corpse and the sounds of it hitting the rocks as it fell below into the flow of the river. While the burden was gone, the thoughts still remain. The guilt. The terror of what exactly had happened the day before. Now, all she can do is preoccupy herself with work.

She continues taking plates of food out to the guests, pushing the ugliness from her mind.

Teora decides to take a fresh batch of towels to the room occupied by a teenager and her father. The girl had burst into tears the night before during dinner and had been escorted out by her father. The poor girl had been crying about her mother and it seems was not in the mood for breakfast today.

As she strolls down the hall of the second floor, Ellowyn O' Maille opens her door just as she passes. She'd only come out to get some wine from the kitchen, something that made Radaha slightly irritated.

"You, come in." Ellowyn commands standing in the threshold.

Teora stops mid-step, looking back. "I can't right now-"

"Now."

Teora glares, tightening her grip on the towels.

Who is this braga to think she can order people around?

Sighing, she places the towels on a chair near the door before she

steps inside Ellowyn's room, now filled with a strange musky smell. Her hand came up to her mouth as Ellowyn shut the door behind her.

And the robot. Its beady eyes boring through Teora as she stood facing Ellowyn. A shudder rippled through her as she averted her pupils from its blank expression.

"Sit." Ellowyn orders, nodding at the chair near the door. As Teora lowers herself down, Ellowyn takes a seat on the bed across from her with a wine glass and bottle in her hands, crossing her legs. There is a long silence while she sips her drink. Her eyes are still glued to Teora.

"You don't like Richie, do you?" she suddenly prods, arching a brow. She reaches over to offer the bottle to Teora, who gives a gesture of refusal.

"Um, I'm not sure what you mean?" Teora replies, her attention switching between the strange woman and her creation. "I...don't understand."

"You can't be that obtuse," Ellowyn replies as she lifts her wine to her lips, steely gray pupils embedded into Teora's. "It's my belief that you clearly do not care for him."

"Well-I, um, I just don't think it's right," Teora manages, noting Ellowyn's blinking puzzlement at her response. "That's all. It's not something I approve of."

"Meaning you don't like artificials?"

"Meaning it goes against nature-false beings." That and it was just straight-up unsettling to look at. Something about the robot's demeanor made her feel uncomfortable.

And she wanted out of there *now*.

"Oh, so," Ellowyn puts her cup down on the nightstand, chuckling as she moves her leg to cross it over the other. "It's a moral stance I see."

"No, it's just-"

"You people make cybernetic limbs but take issue with-"

"Don't say that." Teora scowls, her inflection showing a tinge of anger.

"Say what?"

Now who's being obtuse.

"Say 'you people.' It's disrespectful. We are not like you, alright? We have our own beliefs. Our own customs. Our ways are not yours," she rises from the chair and glances at Richie, electric blue static shivering through its clear dome head. "It's one thing to replace a limb, but that?" she points at the bot, managing to gain confidence despite her intense unease. "Is an abomination."

Ellowyn stands up, wearing an indiscernible expression. "Well you're entitled to feel that way. But I would be more than happy to help change your mind. There are plenty of advantages to robots. They can even do the jobs you don't want," she then takes a step forward, her eyes turning upwards as she gazes at Teora. "You can't possibly enjoy delivering towels and soap, not being thanked, appreciated. Being verbally accosted. Tired all the time. Putting up with bratty children running through the halls. It's exhausting, isn't it?"

As she spoke, Teora felt limp, her face fell. She felt that same tingling chill crawling through her veins again. Every part of her was screaming that she needed to get out of this room. That something about this woman isn't right. She sends her gaze to the floor as Ellowyn finishes.

"You see Richie here, he wouldn't get tired. He would do the job, relieving you of the burden. *That's* the usefulness with androids. They will do the jobs you hate and not complain. They will be the servants," she narrows her eyes to slits. "He could replace you."

"Beep, beep!"

Teora jumps at the bot's sudden vocalization. She looks to Ellowyn again as she brushes past her to the door, keeping her head down. She exits and hurriedly makes her way down the corridor, ultimately

forgetting the towels still resting on the chair.

Inside the room, as Ellowyn watches her leave, her pupils begin to flash a light golden.

22. Chapter 21

Chapter 21

"Maybe she'd go for a walk, just her and the pink switchblade. They were a good pair. Both incapable of opening up without cutting someone."

— Maggie Stiefvater, *The Dream Thieves*

The ride to Mirasal's childhood home just outside Dulaman was a few short miles North of Galivo. The small waterfront city was located along a harbor. In the distance they could see the sails of large boats obscuring the clouds and blotting out the sunlight. The scent of the fresh sea air cool against their skin. The storm seems to once again be relegated to Galivo and the Terog specifically. Out here, you'd never know there had been lightning and thunder the night before.

The morning had been spent in Mirasal's room with her asking questions in regards to Robert's abilities; can he really turn into anything, how long does it take him to grow out a full new limb, had he been a performer back on Earth and why specifically a clown form. He'd simply explained that they were popular in human culture and he had been one at one point. He had explained the history of clowns and circuses. That they were entertainment, much like the performers they had seen the day before.

While sitting in the thyacosma-drawn hooded carriage, driven by a Neeyotyto coachman, her thoughts drifted to Harold and whether or not he had the same ability.

"Yes." Robert growls softly.

"Oh, alright. Just wondering." No further inquiries were made as she stares out along the passing trees as they enter the lush countryside, populated by small houses and farms sporadically placed throughout.

She hadn't bothered going downstairs to help out in the kitchen, since the cold reception she'd been given the night before made her avoid any further contact with everyone. She was happy to once again be escaping that place. It seems like it was now permanently shrouded

in gloom and negativity. The unrelenting storm hadn't helped in that regard.

As the carriage approaches the house just over a steep hill, she could make out the grass-covered roof slowly coming into view. The area was surrounded by trees whose branches hung over the outskirts of the home, which was built into a hillside. There was a small pond just beyond the cobblestone walkway leading to a bright blue door. The familiarity of the environment was a comfort.

"There it is." Mirasal points as she pulls her purple shawl tighter around her and adjusts her hat. She'd worn her new dress and necklace, while Robert was decked out in a black suit and red tie along with his usual ruby handkerchief.

"So...this is your childhood home. I wouldn't have noticed it tucked away there." Robert says as he cranes his neck to get a better look.

"Um, yes after our other house burned down," Mirasal replies. "We moved here afterwards, when I was about ten."

"Burned down..." Robert says as the carriage comes to a halt.

Mirasal offers no response. Instead she fiddles with his shirt collar as they pause in front of the pathway. There were various stone statues of aralia birds of different colors placed along its sides, similar to the ones outside the brothel. A modest garden of varying flora adorned the area below the windows.

"You look good," Mirasal smiles as she pats his lapels. "Now, I should tell you; it's bad manners to insult someone's cooking. So, if you don't like something, keep it to yourself." Saying anything negative about a Thycenian woman's cooking was not acceptable. It was a custom; only she could do that.

"What makes you think I don't know it's bad manners?" Robert queries confused.

"You complain that things aren't salty enough. You can't do that in a Thycenian home."

"Oh. Alright. So I should pretend?"

"She's a good cook. You won't be pretending. But just so you know."

"Okay," he smiles, looking down at her. "You didn't bring the gun."

"She doesn't like me bringing it to the house. Now, there are certain subjects we should not bring up. Like my fasare. Don't mention him."

"Which one? You had two."

"Neither one is good to ask about." Mirasal replies. Robert's habit of asking about sensitive subjects wouldn't go down well with her mother. There are certain things that are not to be broached, her father-both of them-being two of them.

"Alright. Just poetry. That's all," Robert says as he fixes his tie. "Poetry and-"

"And about yourself. Just keep to what you do for a living. Don't reveal anything about, um, your abilities-all of them."

"Why not? What if I want to lighten the mood by doing some tricks-" Robert begins, fingering his handkerchief before Mirasal grips his shoulder.

"No. None of that. No tricks. No illusions. No mentioning your abilities. If she knows you can read her mind..."

"It would scare her?"

"No, not really. It's just she wouldn't like it. I know she wouldn't." If anything would cause her mother to get upset was the revelation she was in the presence of a mentay. She liked keeping things locked away in her head, hidden away from prying eyes. While Mirasal found Robert's ability helpful in terms of not having to explain, her mother would have the opposite reaction.

"So I shouldn't read her thoughts at all?"

"I didn't say that," Although him doing so may be intrusive. "Maybe don't though, if you can help it. Can you help whose mind you read or...?"

"It just happens. I see the memories of someone, hear voices. They just come flowing through my mind and I see flashes from their life," he grins. "Like a view master," he pauses. "Sometimes I hear many voices from multiple sources at once."

"Oh, that sounds terrible, actually." Mirasal frowns at this new bit of information.

"Why?"

"Well, that would be overwhelming wouldn't it?" she clarifies. Seems like it would be a curse as much as a blessing. To her the former far more than the latter.

He shrugs. "Nah, as long as I've put up with it. Some I just drown out and ignore."

"That's good to know I suppose. Well, just don't say anything to her about whatever it is you see in her head. Or that *other* thing."

"You mean my shapeshifting?" Robert smirks.

"Yes. Definitely don't mention that." *That* would certainly scare her mother.

"I wasn't really planning to, so don't worry," he sighs. "You're not used to it yet, huh?"

"You did just thrust that upon me this morning," she replies as she lifts her metal fist to knock on the door. "Masare needs more time though. And I said I'll get used to it." The mental picture of him changing forms comes on; the clown, the fish, the bird, the thyacosma. His skin healing itself. It had been a shock to see, and she needs a little more time to process it.

She certainly wasn't going to put her mother in that position. When the time comes, she'll tell her. Just not now.

"And," Mirasal quickly adds, gesturing at her mouth. "She has these little scars along her bottom lip, try not to stare at them." They made her self-conscious. Any questions in regards to how she had got them were always dismissed or ignored.

There's a minute of silence, as the birds have all of a sudden decided to stop chirping before the door finally opens and Arnamina stood, wearing a silk dress that matches the paint of the door and a thick gold choker. Her hair was done up in it's usual fashion, a bun pulled up at the back of her head with parts left flowing loose.

"Buna diwas." Arnamina states in a voice that is throaty and assured. Her sea green pupils flick to Robert, whose gold ones zero in on the faint circular scars.

Arnamina lay on the damp cold floor of the basement of the brothel, hands bound behind her back. She shakily lifts her head as the door to the room opens, the crack of light causing her to squeeze her lids tightly rather than force them to adjust. She rests her skull back on the ground as she hears footsteps approach. She'd been in there for what seemed to be a few hours, maybe even a day or two. The pain causing her body to go numb, the chilly concrete making her shiver. She lets out a cough before she manages to open her eyes again to see Wyndella standing over her, wearing her long emerald green shawl, smoking and looking like her usual smug self. She stares at Arnamina, blowing smoke before she kneels down, gripping her mane and lifting her head to face her. Arnamina can see a bit of bruising around Wyndella's right socket where she'd slugged her in retaliation for the insult given to her dead sister.

"Still alive. Of course we didn't want to kill you, just teach you a lesson Arnie," she says as a puff of vapor stings Arnamina's wounds along her lips. "I said before there is a hierarchy here, and I am at the top. I don't care who your parents are. I don't care that your sister got incinerated. This isn't your little world of artists and poets. You are to obey the laws behind these walls. When you struck me, you violated those laws."

Arnamina manages to lift her torso, sitting up to face her rival. Squirming, she forces a glower.

"And I said if you mention her name again I'll faca kill you." She manages a painful sneer despite the needles protruding from her lips. She spits, but the saliva doesn't come close to hitting her nemesis. Instead the movement just causes more throbs of pain. She falls back against the wall, the cracks in the brick pricking the bruises along her spine.

Wyndella gives a disgusted scoff as she stands. Storming towards the door,

swinging it open, she turns to give one last glare.

"You're just a whore like the rest of us, Arnie. We're not the ones pretending."

With that, the door slams shut.

"What is he staring at?" Arnamina's voice breaks in as Robert's skewed pupils focus on her scowling at him.

"He's just-" Mirasal starts before Robert cuts her off.

"Nothing. I just have a habit of zoning out. Forgive me." Robert assures as Mirasal gently leads him through the threshold as Arnamina steps aside. Artworks of aralia birds were plastered along the deep red inner walls, along with gold figurines along a small fireplace. On its mantle, a silver urn with designs of spindly trees etched into the metal.

"Oh," Arnamina says, eyeing him skeptically. "Aradea will be here soon. She's off work today."

"Really? Well that's good, you can meet her." Mirasal smiles, turning to Robert, who nods as he approaches Arnamina, who's giving him a once over, a displeased frown still evident.

"So you're R-"

"Robert. Robert Gray. I really like your daughter. She's been teaching me a lot about your culture. She's very special. Very good with details."

Arnamina blinks at him a moment, the angry visage dropping to something more surprised, glancing between him and Mirasal. "Yes, yes. My dea is very special," she pauses. "Not everyone appreciates that aspect of her. And teaching. I'd rather her be doing that. That's Aradea's line of work."

Mirasal frowns as she speaks to her mother mentally.

No, don't do that now.

It's just it's a safer profession. Arnamina retorts, keeping her attention on Robert.

"I would have sworn you two were sisters." Robert adds.

Arnamina gives a little, slightly embarrassed laugh, glancing at her daughter.

Surely, he could do better than that.

"She read me some of your poetry. You're very talented," Robert continues, beaming. "It's really very good. You have a way with words, I have to say. You're up there with some of the greats. And I've read a lot."

Arnamina gives him another look of bewilderment. "Grazach. I haven't written in a while."

"You should keep doing it. It would be a shame to waste your talent."

Arnamina gives an appreciative, bemused smile. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable while we speak privately." She offers as she gestures for Mirasal to follow her. They disappear into the kitchen and as soon as the door shuts, Arnamina is facing her daughter. There's a few moments of silence as she leans against the counter, folding her arms, chin falling against her gold choker.

"Well, what do you think?" Mirasal tilts her body forward in anticipation of her mother's verdict.

"He's..." Arnamina replies, drawing out the 'e' sound.

"What?" Mirasal urges, her hopeful look falling into dejection.

"Charming."

"That's it...?"

"You remember what I told you about the charming ones," Arnamina shakes her head. "He's *too* charming. What's he hiding?" The man's compliments had left her cold.

"He's not *hiding* anything. He's nervous. That's all."

"That stare he does-"

"He just does that. He's in his own mind sometimes."

"Is he like you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well," Arnamina sighs. "You know I always told you the ones with the sweetest tongues have the sharpest teeth."

"That's not what's happening here."

"Last time someone pandered to me like that-"

"He's not *pandering*, he's being *nice*." Mirasal removes her shawl, revealing her new necklace underneath. Arnamina points at it.

"And that, where'd that come from? From him? It looks expensive."

"Yes, he bought it for me," Mirasal replies nonchalantly. "It was a gift. You're not going to criticize a gift now?"

"It's not a good sign if he's buying expensive things for you. Where's he from?"

"He lived on Eartho for some nerors, but originally I don't know."

"Eartho? That means he probably has bad habits. And how come you don't know where he is from? Didn't he tell you?" She steps closer, arms dropping to her sides.

"He's...been through some...trauma. I don't think he wants to talk about it."

"He's hiding things? You *know* what that means.-" Arnamina's lids start to narrow.

"What?"

"That means he has a *mate*. I taught you better than that-"

"He *doesn't*." How dare her mother do this. Try to make her feel bad about Robert. Who'd treated her like she was perfect. Who'd accepted her.

No, she's not going to get away with it this time. She will accept him, whether she wants to or not.

"Give him a chance. You're already dismissing him, when you haven't even really spoken to him. You did this with Imarito too."

Arnamina rests her back against the counter, quiet wraps over them as she ponders, her fingers tapping along the edge. "Just...be careful. I don't want you involved in a situation you'll regret," she stares out the kitchen window. "My youth was spent having my heart, my innocence, everything taken from me. I gave you all what was left."

"I know," Mirasal puts her hand on her shoulder. "You don't need to worry. He's good to me."

Outside the kitchen door, It is sauntering around with Its hands shoved in his pockets. It has eavesdropped on the conversation long enough. Looking down the shadowy hallway, It sees the silhouette of three doors in a row. Approaching, It opens the first one to see a small bed and toys, evidence that this was a child's room. The barrage of ancient scents that come streaming out are not familiar. So this had not been her room. It shuts the door and proceeds to the next one. Again the smells are unfamiliar.

The third room reveals her scent. He swings the door open further, causing the dust particles in the air to shimmer in the sunlight spilling onto the patchwork quilt of the bed. It steps in, glancing around, detecting the different scents circling around the small space. Happiness, affection, shame, anger, loneliness, sadness.

And rage. A lot of rage.

It spies a shelf of dolls near the headboard. Each one has a coat of dust along the patterned fabric of their delicate dresses and painted-on faces. Each has had their left arm torn off, leaving only bits of cotton sticking out.

It steps closer and picks one up, gazing down at its features with its black

button eyes and thin red smile. It sees a brief image of Arnamina sitting on the bed, clutching the same doll to her chest. Another image comes of her lashing out at someone, the adoptive father. An image of her using a dropper, letting bits of a narcotic trickle onto her tongue comes on and a volatile argument with her parents, with angry exchanges of words and threats of never returning.

The whole house possesses a heaviness to it in the way it feels. Normally It would relish in the misery It sensed here. But doing so made It feel uncomfortable.

Robert where are you?

In here. In your room.

Moments later Mirasal enters, gingerly, her cerulean pupils scanning the room's nooks and crannies. "I haven't been in here in a while."

"I uh, just stumbled upon it." Robert places the doll back with the others.

"Not sure why she keeps our rooms the same."

"Memories. She misses you being here." Robert says, his irises looking more prominently golden in the sunlight.

"You read her mind, huh?" Mirasal says as she sits on the bed. Just being here made her feel like a little girl again.

"Couldn't really help it, it just came on. I saw some things." he purses his lips.

Things you may not want to know about.

Mirasal stares out the window. "She misses us."

Robert nods. "She does. She's lonely." He sits beside her, their combined weight making the wooden frame creak. She quietly ruminates over this information for a spell, listening to the developing wind passing through the trees outside.

"I guess she would, she's alone out here. Aradea stays here often

though." Might be the reason her mother spends so much time at her bar. Company, no matter how shady.

Mirasal reaches over to the foot of the bed and opens a large wooden chest, lifting out a small ratty blue dress with gold triangles along the hem. "It's still in here," she smiles as she holds it up, examining it. "This was my favorite dress when I was little. Naseret had the same one." she turns to show it to Robert, who smiles.

"Can you believe I was once this small?" She folds it up and places it back in the chest as she catches sight of a cabinet with clear glass doors hanging on the wall, displaying small wooden carvings. She stands and approaches as her metal fingers reach for the tiny gold handle. She removes a small piece of dark purple quartz hidden near the back.

She frowns as she turns it in her palm, studying the faded angles. "I remember it being a lot more brighter."

"Your real father gave that to you." Robert says as she returns to her spot by him.

"Yes, Naseret has one just like it," she replies. She kept it here at the house and as far as she knows, Naseret has hers here too. "It's a stone from Drava," she quickly gestures out the window. "It's a planet nearby. There's one called blood stone, which is the most valuable. this one," she holds it outwards, the color appearing translucent in the direct sunlight. "Not so much, since it's the most common." The crimson ones were the most desired. In the past, it led to foreign invaders attempting to mine the planet of its resources.

Which in turn led to war.

"Why don't you have it with you? It's special right?"

Mirasal shrugs, letting out a deep sigh. "It doesn't seem right to own it. Since the natives to Drava consider the rocks sacred. It just seems wrong." Both the Podmalo and the Aniterra believe the spirits of the dead inhabit the rocks of their world, causing harm to anyone who desecrates them. Deep down, a small part of her had once entertained the idea that it was the cause of the bad luck her family had seen. A

thought she later dismissed as silly and illogical.

Robert sticks his palm out, wiggling his fingers and she places it in his hand. Holding it between his fingertips, he examines the small scratch marks along its surface.

"Finish them," Cyate mutters, waving his sword as he walks past the two Aniterrea soldiers who lay along the ground, blood coursing from their mouths into a puddle along the purple quartz rocks.

"You didn't tell me you were going to kill all of them." Nehautor says, his blue-violet eyes looking down at the soldiers. Finishing them off would be a mercy. The other Dyas Thraeg members were spread around, collecting the heads of the fallen.

"I didn't kill all of them. That one is still alive, ain't that right?" Cyate points at a young Aniterrian, much younger than the others. The boy looks petrified as Cyate begins to approach him, a maniacal grin on his face.

"He's alive, because he has to deliver a message." Cyate throws an arm around his neck. The kid freezes under the touch.

"Go back to your capital. Tell your leaders the head-taker sent you."

"Aradea is here." Arnamina peeks into the bedroom door.

"We'll be right there." Mirasal says as Robert places the stone back in her hands. She returns it to the cabinet and they enter the living room where Arnamina is sitting on the sofa with Aradea. The young woman, wearing a cream dress, turns her head and smiles, her curly auburn mane bouncing in response to the movement. Her eyes are a pale blue with a soft tint of violet.

Mirasal signs a greeting and the two communicate with their hands for a moment before Aradea rises and approaches. She gives Robert a little wave as he recognizes her scent; it had been present in the first room.

"Aradea, nice to meet you." Robert says before he sends a question to Mirasal by thought.

Is she completely deaf?

Yes.

Can she communicate telepathically?

No, she's never been able to.

"Aradea teaches hand speak at the nearby school," Arnamina stands and curves an arm around her youngest. "A lot of her students are outworlders. Young ones."

Robert nods. "That's a noble profession."

It can see in the young woman's mind, visuals, but no sounds. Just images rapidly passing by. Images of being left behind, ignored, forgotten about. Her older sisters speeding ahead as they run from the howling of the cave.

"It is," Arnamina concurs as she brushes past. "Let's eat, shall we?"

The table was already set. Everything had been cooked earlier with a few bowls of different courses laid out along the soft pink tablecloth. A bottle of Narculli in the center. Her mother had broken out her best dishes, which was something. Robert pulls Arnamina's chair out for her, which gets him an appreciative but surprised nod. He repeats the gesture for Aradea and finally Mirasal.

"I didn't say that to impress you." he says as he sits, sliding his chair closer to the table. He brings his hands up to finger his tie.

Arnamina reaches for a bowl in the center of the table, the edges of her mouth curl up, not responding.

"I know you're thinking that I'm insincere." he continues.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" Arnamina challenges.

"I just know." Robert says as Mirasal reaches beneath the tablecloth and squeezes his thigh.

Don't say anything.

Arnamina passes a clear glass bowl of meat and vegetables to Aradea, whose irises are darting between her mother and the mysterious

guest.

"Well, you and Mirasal haven't known each other long, have you?" Arnamina continues.

"Actually, no."

"I've never heard her mention you before yesterday."

"We met a few days ago." Mirasal interjects. as Aradea passes the bowl to Robert with a polite smile.

"I asked her to teach me. Your language and culture. She's very good at it."

"Yes, well, I said before I'd rather have her doing something like that." Arnamina meets Mirasal's annoyed countenance.

Mirasal comes running up the pathway of the house, waving a letter in her hands. "Look! I passed the test! They want me to train as a pilot!"

"I thought you said the hospital?"

"At first they did, but since I passed, they think I'd be a good pilot."

Arnamina pauses, holding her watering can, staring at her a moment before, "No."

Mirasal stops in her tracks. "...What?"

"You're not doing that. No."

"What? Why?"

"It's too dangerous. No."

"But I passed the test. They say I'd be good at it. That I'd be useful."

"By 'useful' they mean they send you off to die." Arnamina resumes watering the garden.

"But, this would give me a purpose! I'm not really good at anything else. They said my attention to details would make me a good pilot. You know

someone like me can't-"

"You can find purpose as something else, like a teacher. You're sister is-"

"I don't want to be a teacher, I want to be a pilot!" Mirasal hollers as she storms inside. Arnamina slams the watering can down, her full lips pulled into a line. She follows her irate daughter, slamming the door shut.

"You want to get killed, is that it? Because that is what will happen. Look at that. You see that?" she points at the urn on the mantle. "That's how she came back."

Mirasal keeps her back to her, arms folded. "So that's it. Her," she inhales before spinning around. "That has nothing to do with me."

"But the risk is there."

"I wouldn't be in combat, I'm just going to fly the ship. And be the lookout-"

"You could get shot down."

"Esida will be with me."

"I don't care if she's doing it. Is she behind this? Is she the one who put this idea in your head?"

"No! You're only focusing on the bad things that could happen. It would mean a lot to me if you said 'yes,' because I have to do this."

Arnamina sighs wearily. "Promise me you won't, knowing how I feel about it."

Mirasal quietly reaches up and places her flesh hand on her mother's chest, before she walks towards the door, giving one last glance back as she exits.

Robert lowers his fork, his gaze passing between the two women. "Children should make their own way, don't you think?"

Arnamina seems amused at this as she raises her wine glass. "When that way includes possible death, I have to disagree."

"But that's still her choice, not yours. She's an adult. She's serving your people, isn't she?"

"She's not serving anyone other than those in power who have no issue with sending her and others like her to die in pointless wars. They mourn them and treat them as honored ones who sacrificed, but then they go about sending more to be killed. My sister died in a war that shouldn't have even started, chiamo Gray."

Mirasal stares at her mother; this was the first she'd ever heard her mention her sister openly. Only in private, had she alluded to her on rare occasions. Her mother meets her stunned gaze, her eyes looking glazed.

Arnamina sits on her bed as a knock is heard on the door. She stands up and walks to her bedroom doorway, seeing two military officers enter the home and deliver a whispered message with somber expressions. Her mother Sensza falls against Galiago weeping softly. The officers attempt to assure her that Valasad's sacrifice will be remembered. Sensza turns and lashes out at them. Her sobbing making her almost incomprehensible.

"Your war. I don't care about your war. Get out!" she yells, striking at the officers as they retreat back out the door. Galiago attempts to hold her back as she continues to yell.

Arnamina goes back to her bed and curls up in a fetal position, numbness crawling through her skin, still listening to her mother's crying and shouting.

Arnamina continues, "I don't think you understand the risk involved. I don't know how it works where you come from...wherever you come from," she mutters that last sentence. "Unless you've actually lost someone, you can't-"

"I have. I saw my children slaughtered before me. I know that feeling."

A deathly hush seeps through the air, so poignant you could here the wind crushing through the tree branches outside. Mirasal trades her gaze between Robert and her mother, while Aradea, seemingly sensing something is amiss, fiddles with her utensils.

Arnamina clears her throat. "Susa, chiamo gray." she whispers, she fingers the bottom half of the wine glass, examining the red liquid inside.

"Robert." Mirasal touches his hand that sits atop the table. He gives a small hand gesture, assuring her it's fine.

"It was a long time ago. But I understand. Everyone experiences loss at some point. It's a part of the life cycle. What's important is what we do with the time we have." he says.

"Yes, I suppose so," Arnamina arches her brows, pupils cast downwards, giving a snuffle. "That is very true."

Aradea stretches across the table to try to reach a bowl near Robert. He immediately grabs it and stands. Walking over to her, he starts spooning a small helping onto her plate. She nods and smiles as he returns to his chair.

Mirasal gives Robert her own smile, turning to Arnamina, who looks on approvingly.

The visit lasted into early evening, with them discussing poetry, language and art. When Mirasal and Arnamina are back in the kitchen washing dishes, Robert entertains Aradea by teaching her how to fold napkins into the shapes of birds. Cranes, he called them.

"So, have you...what do you think of yirgs?" Mirasal queries as she dries a plate with a towel.

Arnamina blinks at her. "Yirgs? Shapetakers?"

"Yes."

"Why would you be asking-"

"They came up with Robert. Mythology...do you believe in them?"

Arnamina stares off, hands in the suds of the sink, lips pressed together, "No. I can't say I do. But your ahauvo, he does."

"He does? I didn't know that."

"Yes. Can you believe it? A sensible man like that believing in such things. I don't think he would've admitted it to me, had I not noticed those eyes he placed in that painting. The one of his sister. I think it's at the hotel, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes it is." Mirasal places the dish in the cupboard as she steals a peek at Robert. Knowing her eyes are on him, he looks up and beams.

A short while later goodbyes are said as the carriage arrives, the coachman tipping his hat as they climb in. Arnamina and Aradea stand at the end of the pathway, waving them off.

"That went well," Mirasal turns to Robert as she settles her back against the seat. "It got a little tense for a moment." She stays quiet about his reveal at the table. No need to ask about it. She places her hand over his, which trembles under her palm.

"Your mother had some interesting memories, though." He pushes his bottom lip out.

Mirasal gazes out at the scenery blurring past, contemplating.

"You want to know?"

"No," she blurts out. "No, I'd rather not." Her mother's secrets had long been buried under a scorched earth, hidden away. Never allowing a single soul to see in.

She kept it that way for a reason.

"You sure?" Robert asks as she leans her head against his shoulder, watching as they enter the city, the neon lights and street lamps streaming across their faces.

"Yes. I'm sure."

23. Chapter 22

Chapter 22

"I like it that order exists somewhere even if it shatters near me."

— Elizabeth Moon, *The Speed of Dark*

That evening, prior to dinner being served, Brandon Wilkes was speeding down the hallway of the second floor of the Terog on his tricycle. His parents were down in the dining area along with the other guests, chatting. They'd given up when he'd thrown a tantrum about wanting to ride his bike rather than eat. Trying to avoid a scene, they let him have his way.

A large child with a thin layer of fuzzy brown hair and thick black-rimmed glasses, he peddles furiously on the navy blue tricycle through the corridor, the wheels loudly squeaking, almost knocking into a tall blonde woman in a pink pleated skirt exiting her room as he rounds a corner.

"Hey, hey chill!" she snaps with her palms out, motioning for him to slow down, as the edge of his front wheel just about hits her calf as he comes to a skidding stop.

"Come on, move!" Brandon whines as she sidesteps him, sending a sneer over her shoulder as he takes off, blowing past her skirt, zooming back down the hall.

"God, what a little monster." she mutters, taking another cursory look back as she descends the stairs.

Brandon rounds another corner and comes to an abrupt screeching halt. Adjusting his spectacles as he focused on what was standing at the far end of the hallway.

A clown. Tall, grinning and holding a bundle of red balloons. Brandon stares for a moment, his fingers still tightly gripping the handlebars. He swallows nervously as the clown approaches, doing a little skipping movement along the way, bells chiming with each

step.

"Hiya Brandon," the clown says as he comes to a pause in front of the boy. He's now towering over him, Brandon has to actually crane his neck up to look at him. "What a nice bike. Blue is a nice color, although I prefer red or orange."

"Um, thanks I guess," Brandon replies, before making a scrunched up face. "Orange? *Blegh.*"

The clown laughs at his reaction, seemingly unbothered. His voice high and merry. "Would you like a balloon?" He presents one from the bundle, with the white string flowing daintily between his left thumb and index finger, curling at the end. "Here, take it. Go on."

"Yeah, no thanks. I don't like balloons."

"All children love balloons."

"Not me." Brandon counters as his irises glance up at the bundle of crimson, uneasiness evident as he lowers his head back down.

It smiles at the boy. Nothing wrong with a bit of a challenge. Although this could wear thin after so long, but It will go along with it. Until It runs out of patience and has to snap the kid's neck.

But where would the fun in that be?

It stares down at him as he senses fear. Beautiful, delightful delicious fear.

But not of It, no, but of the balloons.

"Are you afraid of balloons?" The clown smiles, kneeling down, close enough that Brandon could see his crystal blues only inches from his own.

"No!" Brandon replies defensively. "No, I'm not." He glances at the bundle again, tilting back slightly in his seat, as if anticipating an attack.

"Yes, I think you are." It grins obscenely wide.

Globophobia. This will be too easy. It sees in the depths of the boy's mind, other children, mostly boys, teasing Brandon for his fear and him running away in tears. It sees the boy sitting in a therapist's office with his parents, trying to overcome it, to no avail.

"No I'm not!" Brandon raises his voice, irritated. "How would you know, you dumb buck-toothed clown?"

It ignores the insult and smirks, raising his white-gloved fingers and presenting an incredibly long thick needle, which seems to appear in his hand out of thin air. Its pointed tip shimmering in the light above. He stands up, still grinning down at the boy.

"Oh, I think you are." His voice is different now. Gone is the high-pitched care-free tone, now replaced with a low gravelly, slightly menacing inflection. The stark blue of his pupils have transformed into a pure gold.

It proceeds to very slowly move Its hand, pointing at a balloon. Wiggling Its brows, Its grin still drawn ear to ear as It carefully observes the boy's reaction as he realizes what Its intention is. Savoring his fear.

It was delectable.

Pop!

Brandon jumps on the leather seat, his sockets now bulging. "Ah!"

Pop! Pop! Pop!

"Ah! Stop! You stupid clown!" Brandon leaps off the seat of his tricycle and bolts down the opposite end of the corridor. The popping sounds pursuing him, echoing around him as he ran. He stops at the corner as he sees another bundle of red balloons, minus the weird clown, just floating mid-air. Each one printed with 'Brandon.'

Suddenly they all burst simultaneously, the explosion of noise sending Brandon tumbling backwards. He jumps up and takes off towards the stairs.

He needs to get to his parents.

As he runs faster, the hallway seems to become darker and expands, becoming elongated, longer, longer still. A feeling of tingling weakness spreading through his legs and a heaviness in the pit of his stomach as he quickly tires when he seems unable to reach the stairwell. Its drifting farther and farther away. He drops to his knees, his glasses falling off to the carpet as he lands on his belly.

Rolling over, he stares upwards at the lights above as a shadow eclipses them. The clown is now standing over him, gazing down. Despite his blurred vision, Brandon can tell the clown's features are morphing, changing. His buck-teeth now sharper. It reminds Brandon of a shark's mouth.

In his room nearby, Gabriel hears what sounds like a child's scream. He sits up and heads to the door. Opening it only to see a small blue tricycle-and no one else around.

"Damn, Kikara where the Hell are you." he mumbles as he glances down either end of the hall. She'd gone down to serve and wasn't back yet. He was getting impatient. He sure as Hell didn't want to be alone for long. Not something he'd want to admit to her, though.

Just as he's about to shut the door, the tricycle begins to roll across the carpet, its tiny white pedals moving languidly. Gabriel immediately slams the door shut and backs away from it.

"Not this shit again." The familiar ghostly face in the mirror, which caused him to switch rooms altogether, the wheelchair and that mocking voice had rendered him nearly paralyzed with fright. But it had subsided and he'd managed to calm down. And now, seeing this child's bike rolling along the floor, as if being driven by a phantom, was causing it to manifest again.

And he resented it. It was time to face it, whatever it is. He's not going to be afraid. He can't be.

Flinging the door open, he marches out into the middle of the hallway. "Alright! What the fuck are you, huh? What do you want? You're the one who's been tormenting Kikara! Why don't you show yourself, you cowardly motherfucker! Come on!" He's almost out of breath by the time he's finished.

The response to his challenge is cold silence. That is until...

Click, click, click.

Gabriel's ears pricked up at this sound, a shudder tiptoeing down his spine. It was soft, but clear.

Click, click.

Spurs. Definitely. He recognized that sound instantly. It was followed by the sound of faint music. The gentle sounds of the chords of a guitar. Sweating, Gabriel gingerly started towards the corner of the hall, the area where he surmised the music was coming from. Feeling a rush of bravery in his desire to face whatever it was menacing him and his lover, he jumped out from behind the wall.

"Tzipitio..." he barely manages to mutter as his sight fixes on a tall, lithe figure dressed in black, save for his belt, which was a brilliant polished silver that matched the spurs of his boots and the metal of the guitar he held in his large hands. His face is obscured by a large black hat, but Gabriel could make out the bottom half of his chin; pale, chalky white.

It was him. The goblin. His nightmare come true. This couldn't be.

The figure lifts his head ever so slightly, revealing an odd ruby-rimmed mouth behind the rim of the hat. As if reading Gabriel's thoughts, he raises his head and grins. His eyes a piercing golden yellow, the red mouth had stripes that slithered up either side of his cheeks and through his eyelids.

"Not just me, Gabby. Someone else is here to see you." the figure says, strumming the strings of the guitar with spindly fingers, his voice rough and obscene. As he speaks, another figure rolls out from beside him from behind the wall, seated in a wheelchair. That same damn wheelchair.

Gabriel's heart pounds harder against his tightening chest, the sweat forming courses down his forehead.

No, it can't be. It can't.

"Uncle Alfredo," he sputters. "Uncle..."

"Hiya there, Gabs. Tell me, was it worth it? Killing me? You left my window open intentionally, so I'd fall ill with pneumonia, knowing full well I wouldn't recover. And you could take my fortune. You knew you were my favorite," Alfredo grips the wheels of his chair and rolls closer. His wrinkled eyes seeming to tear up. "You knew I'd left you everything in my will, but you couldn't wait to do away with me. So you caused me to catch my death of cold. Remember when you were little and you'd come to my house to play and I'd give you sweets? How could you do it to me after everything I did for you?"

"Uncle..." Gabriel's voice is splintering as he gazes down, his bottom lip quivering. "Uncle, I didn't-" The tears are welling up as he hangs his head down.

"Only consolation for me," Alfredo breaks in. "Your life appears to be shit."

The shift in Alfredo's tone causes Gabriel's head to shoot up, blinking back the freshly-formed tears. Alfredo's irises, in life they had been a kind light brown, now took on a more malevolent golden. Not unlike the creature that stood behind him.

"Look at you. Your wife hates you and only stays for the money. You can't stop fucking every whore you come across-when you *can* actually fuck!" Alfredo cackles, that same crackling, sinister laugh. Gabriel straightens, his morose, regretful demeanor melting away at the old man's words. Whatever guilt that was swelling within him evaporated.

"I'm glad I killed you," Gabriel glares pointedly at his uncle. "Useless, pathetic old man who didn't know how to manage a company. We would have gone bankrupt because of you. People would *thank me* if they knew the truth."

The dark figure standing behind Alfredo flips back his black cape and places his hands on the grips of the chair as he shoves it forward, with Alfredo's mouth becoming wider, abnormally so, his eye sockets now darkened pits, with coal black smoke billowing from them as he charges at his nephew shrieking. His appearance now becoming more

ghost-like, growing whiter, with visible veins rooting through his skin.

"Come on fat boy! Don't you wanna give your uncle a kiss?"

Gabriel turns and runs, the fear he felt comes rushing back as he ran towards the stairs, nearly tripping down the steps as he descended them, gripping the railing, his sweat making his palms slippery. He makes his way towards the back entrance, running down the hill, coming to a halt right near the water of the grotto.

He remains there, hunched over, his hand pressed to his chest, his breathing labored. He snuffles as he rises back up to glance at the building, painted with strange shadows. Maybe he was safe out here. Just as his panic is starting to trickle away he hears splashing right behind him. The fear comes tearing back through him as he hesitantly turns his head, but pauses.

No, don't you acknowledge it, it might stop.

He keeps himself from actually looking, as the noise intensifies.

Don't look. Don't look.

Finally, as if being pulled by some unseen force, he turns and gazes down at the rippling water. Nothing but a violent burst of bubbles in the middle, disrupting the surface. Gradually, a woman's head breaks through, all water-slicked pale gray with those same golden eyes and ruby stripes. A white veil covered most of her hair. As her whole body levitates from the dark murky water, the little moonlight outlining her inhuman features, her trembling red mouth is agape, her pasty arms outstretched as she starts to wail. A sickening otherworldly cry as her hair flails out from behind her thin frame. The water drips from her bare feet as she hovered above.

"Help me find my children," she cries as she starts to glide towards him. "They all float."

For the first time, Gabriel Leon screams, shattering the quiet night. He whirls around and runs back towards the back entrance, all the while sensing this thing was right behind him. He dashes inside and

heads straight for the dining area. He makes his way through the patrons, knocking into Tomah as he exits the kitchen.

Nearby, Harold sits at the same table near the windows, watching, shaking his head as the room is filling with gasps and whispers.

"Faca! What the crousa?!" Tomah angrily says as a tray of food is knocked from his grip, causing the contents to splatter on the floor, some bits and crumbs hitting a few of the guests.

Gabriel comes to a stop at the countertop, it being the only thing keeping him from tumbling to the floor. His energy drained. His visage wild with terror, his mouth gaping, chest heaving. Kikara stares at him, holding a bowl that promptly falls from her grasp and shatters to the floor as she runs to him, holding his shoulders.

"Gabe..." she gasps.

Radaha, at the stove, sends a concerned glance over her shoulder as Gabriel remains leaning his weight against the counter. His mind is racing, but the only consistent thought present is those golden eyes. They were familiar.

Very familiar.

Mirasal sat at her desk, carving. The window was open slightly, enough to allow a faint breeze trickle in, brushing her face as she worked on a figure of Dhesda. She wasn't particularly good at more humanoid forms, but she decided to try and the results were turning out fairly well. She occasionally glances up to admire the rose. It had started its soft singing when she sat down to carve.

After it had quieted down its melody, she'd snapped on the radio. *'Oh, my love, my darling, I've hungered for your touch, a long, lonely time, time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much, are you still mine?'*

She and Robert had gone to a restaurant, which had been enjoyable, except for the brawl that broke out between a group of patrons, which had almost ruined the experience.

She hadn't seen Kikara since she'd returned. Having dinner out saved

her having to visit the kitchen. Definitely for the better. Kikara's growing hostility made for an unpleasant work environment. It was best she wasn't there.

Robert had gone out to meet a client. Someone at the hotel that he said might have some antiques he's interested in. She's done quite a bit of carving in his absence, and just as she's thinking he's a bit late, he comes in through the door of the room and immediately heads over to plant a kiss on her lips.

"How ya' been?" he grins, as he leans against the desk, studying her array of newly-created figurines.

"Well, I missed you," she begins, her smile fading as she notices he's scowling down at the desk. She blinks at him. "Um, what? Is something wrong?"

"What is *that*?" he sneers, his gaze focused on a small carving of a turtle she'd just completed earlier. He's looking at it like it had offended him somehow. She glances between him and the figurine, trying to discern whatever he could possibly be referring to.

"...This?" she turns off the radio and lifts up the carving in question. "It's-"

"A turtle." Robert finishes, still looking thoroughly disgusted, not taking his eyes off of it.

Mirasal is still exchanging glances between him and the small wooden animal. "Um, yes? It is. It's an Eartho animal. I've only seen pictures, but one was in my dream last night."

"Why would you make *that*?" he shakes his head.

What is his problem?

"I just told you. My dream. I saw one briefly in it," she leans against the chair, placing the figure back down among the others. "You're upset. You don't like turtles?"

"No, actually I don't."

"...But why?"

Robert sends his agitated mien to the other side of the room, blowing a sigh through his nose. "I just...don't."

Mirasal can't help a small smirk. "Did one bite you once or something?" she chuckles, trying to make light of this odd attitude. She abruptly pauses her snickering as his scowling face shoots back to her, a clear look of irritation.

He's angry it seems.

"Susa," she says. "I'm just playing. I'll put it away," she opens a drawer in the desk and places it inside. "Out of sight now."

Robert silently walks to the bed, sitting down. He loosens his tie and slides it off, not saying anything as he continues to undress. She switches off the lamp light on the desk and walks to the bed, shedding her own clothing. Under the covers, his back is facing her, as he settles against the pillow.

"Good night." he says flatly, coldly.

She observes him a moment. Why didn't he just go back to his own room if he's so disgusted? Letting out a sigh and switching the bedside lamp off, she nestles against her own pillow, giving him one last glimpse as she turns her back to face his.

All of this over a turtle.

Teora sat in the now-empty dining area. It was late. The middle of the night. A bottle of Narculli sat in front of her. She twirled the wine glass in her palm as she slouched against the back of the chair.

This was her quiet time. A break from the chaos of work; guests and co-workers. She hadn't thought about whatever it was lurking around, preying on the guests. Maybe she should, but for some reason she felt it wasn't a concern for her. Whatever it is, clearly has a taste for the humans.

She takes in a weary deep breath just as she spies something moving

in her periphery. A tiny shimmer of bright glowing blue light on the far side of the room. Puzzled, glances at it.

Richie.

She sits up, placing her glass atop the table. She keeps her gaze locked on the bot for a few moments.

"Buna, *Richie*." she finally offers. "What are you doing here? Wanting a drink?" she chuckles, feeling a little tipsy. "I can pour you one."

Am I actually talking to a stupid robot? And offering it a drink? Am I that desperately lonely?

She chortles to herself against the rim of her glass as she finishes the last remaining bit of red sitting at the bottom. She then stands up, wine bottle in palm as she heads to the kitchen. Radaha, who was gone for the night, monitors the alcohol, so she'll notice most of it is gone.

Oh well. She's greedy with it anyway. It belongs to the hotel.

Placing it back in the cupboard and running the glass under the faucet, she exits and is met with Richie right outside the door.

He must move *fast*. He'd been clear on the other side of the dining hall, and now was a few feet away from her.

"Beep beep," Teora giggles. "Beep."

Richie doesn't move. Doesn't respond. Instead, the android's beady spheres stay blank-not that they could emit anything else. They were just two dots placed along his glass dome head.

"Aren't you going to make that noise?"

Dumb robot. I hate the way this thing stares. And it doesn't even technically have eyes.

Still, that same uneasiness creeps up her frame, and stays there. She reaches up to scratch the back of her neck.

"Um, I guess I'll be going now. You better head back to your maker. Does she know you're down here?"

Like it could actually give an answer.

The bot's vibrant blue light writhing within like a small cluster of lightning bolts starts to change color. First, to a soft pink, then shifting into a stunning brilliant crimson. Growing brighter with each moment. Teora's eyes grow larger as she watches it lift something from behind its back.

A rather large vase. How she missed it given how skinny its body was, was beyond her.

The droid raises it above its head. Teora yelps, her heart catapulting into her throat as she leaps aside as it flings it at her, smashing against the door frame, knocking a painting to the ground as pieces scatter. Landing harshly on the tiled floor, she stares up at it stunned as it begins to reach for other items around; a napkin holder, another vase, a decorative arrangement from the center of a table. Each one being flung at her as she ran towards the dining room exit, calling for the others. Ducking at each item attempting to hit her as they slam against the wall, dodging underneath tables, blocking with her arms. She reaches for a chair and uses the seat as a shield.

"Tomah! Mirasal! Kikara!"

Why does no one hear her screaming?

"Somebody! Help me!"

She mercifully makes it to the exit without injury, dodging a small glass that shatters against the door frame near her head. With Richie in hot pursuit, she jetted up the main stairwell. Tripping and falling as Richie snatches her right ankle, yanking her back down, about to leap on top of her when she gives a powerful kick to its noggin, knocking it backwards, sending it rolling down the stairs. She continues up the stairwell as it lands at the foot of the staircase. Reaching the top, she stands and stares down at it.

Not moving.

Its body then convulses before its head darts up, the glow inside its dome becoming a more blood red. It jumps up and starts up the steps. Teora screams and runs to a nearby empty room. Slamming the door shut and locking it. Beneath the crack of the doorway, she sees the crimson luminescence slitting through. The only sound in the room is her ragged breaths as she waits. Maybe it doesn't know she's in here, since she'd made it inside before it reached the top. She waits, with her heart thumping against her chest.

Bam! Bam!

"Ah!" Teora jumps back as the bot starts to pound its metallic fists against the door, causing the framed pictures hanging by the door to tumble to the carpet, a small vase on a dresser falls off due to the thunderous vibration.

How is no one hearing all this?

"That does it." she growls, grabbing up the vase and ripping the door open to face this thing. She's not going to be intimidated by a stupid robot. No way.

Remember, a race of warriors. Her sister Namaia, a soldier, would take this thing out with no problem. She could do it too.

"Come on you stupid thing! I'm not afraid of you!" Teora shouts as she leaps out, vase stretched above her head. Richie ducks down, backing away, looking like its about to make another attack-or retreat- when a voice drifts from the tenebrous hallway.

"Richie!" Ellowyn steps out of the shadows, at the end of the hall near the top of the stairs. "Richie! Settle down!"

She approaches, putting her hand on the droid's square shoulder. "Terribly sorry. He...does this."

"Tries to kill people?" Teora keeps her vase weapon raised. No way is she lowering her guard now.

"He's only playing." Ellowyn assures, tracing her fingertips along the clear glass of its dome, tiny ruby specks reflected in her pupils from the light still sparking within.

"That's not how you play." Teora argues. No, this thing was actively trying to hurt her. To call it 'playing' is ludicrous. She's not falling for it.

"It's how *he* plays," Ellowyn replies, nodding at Richie. "I assure you, no malice was intended, he just gets a little...carried away."

Gingerly, Teora lowers the vase, her breathing calms as she watches Ellowyn saunter back into the darkness of the corridor, guiding her creation along. She gives Teora an assuring final glance.

Richie's deathly red light returns to its more softer blue as they walk away.

24. Chapter 23

Chapter 23

"The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own."

— Willa Cather

The fog is dense, obscuring the heavy wooded area as Mirasal walks among the trees barefoot in a white nightgown, in pursuit of a sound. Soft weeping noises coming from somewhere within the thick of the tree trunks, the area dreary and drab. Eventually a Thyccenian woman comes into view, sitting under a small tree across a thin shallow stream peppered with stones, obscured by shadows, her head hanging down, her sobbing is quiet, causing her shoulders to shake. Mirasal approaches hesitantly, her gaze pinned to the somber figure. The woman appears to be holding someone in her arms. The view however, is obscured.

Mirasal steps across the water-slicked rocks, feeling the rugged cold of their surface. As she begins to come closer, she reaches her flesh hand out, her fingers visibly trembling. Coming nearer to the figure, it becomes more visible, the shadows receding, being sucked back into the darkness of the forest surrounding them. The fog begins to evaporate as she steps even closer. Mirasal gasps as the woman abruptly turns around.

It was, unmistakably, her own face gazing up at her. Upon seeing what she is holding in her arms, she cups her hand to her mouth.

Imarito, lifeless, his expression vacant. A line of blood trickling from his mouth.

Her doppelganger suddenly lifts her hand out towards her, her pupils now fogged over, still continuing her cries. Mirasal stumbles backwards, her horrified visage not wavering as she turns to run. Splashing across the narrow river that was now flowing a deep crimson, a chorus of arms dart out of the surface to grab at her ankles, her feet feeling like weights, as if her legs are shackled, barely able to move as she screams. Everything seemingly in slow-motion as she dodges the parade of fingers grabbing at her feet. As she gets farther away, she halts in her escape when she gets to

a sun-drenched clearing. The atmosphere more cheerful, with the chirping of birds sitting atop nearby branches.

Before her in the center of the clearing, sitting on a moss-covered round rock is a small turtle. The rays of shimmering sunlight touching down upon its rounded shell. Its expression exuding a calmness. Kindness. Its irises a clear gold, sprinkled with bits of amber.

Mirasal stands gawking at the animal. The terror she'd felt flooding through her now disappearing as she locked gazes with the creature. She suddenly steps forward, picking it up by its plastron and holding it to face her leveled stare. The calmness she felt in its presence continuing to spread through her body, like a warm blanket being wrapped around her.

The turtle's pupils suddenly start to glow a sharp yellow, its beak opening to mimic that same blinding light.

There's a flash across her vision and then nothing.

Mirasal jolts up, gasping as she props up on her elbows, sweating, relieved it had only been a dream-or rather a nightmare. Thankfully the suns will rise soon.

Letting out a shaky sigh, she glances to Robert's side of the bed.

Empty.

He's nowhere to be found. The faint moonlight offering little illumination through the thin material of the curtains. Her eyes are drawn to the door upon hearing odd sounds on the other side. Crunching, clicking, slurping noises right outside in the hallway.

Tossing the covers off and switching on the lamp, she rises, slipping on a blue silk robe along the way, keeping her attention glued to the doorway. The noises still persist. She creeps closer, her metal fingers curl around the doorknob as she very slowly begins to turn it. The sounds abruptly stop as she peeks her head out, squinting in order to focus in the dim light from the windows gleaming the passageway. There, lurking among the shadows of the hall is something fairly large, from what little she can see. Suspended in the dark are a pair of almond-shaped pupilless eyes, with smaller rounder ones just

above. Red and smoldering. She catches her breath as her gaze is then drawn to a bare arm with bloody fingers in this creature's grasp, small and twitching as whatever it is chews on the dead flesh. Mirasal gags as the rancid smell reaches her nose.

Then a mandible, like that of an enormous insect, comes into view as it pulls the limb closer to it, the faint sounds of clicking and raspy breaths are audible.

Robert. Robert is missing.

And that thing has something. Someone.

As panic begins to manifest within her, the creature's eyes then seem to focus on her.

A fresh wave of terror now shoots through her as she slams the door, her breathing speeding up as she heads to her desk. She throws open the drawer, where her gun is encased and snatches it up, her heartbeat pulsing through her ears. She turns as she hears the floorboards creak and sees Robert standing behind her. A strangely tranquil mien upon his features.

Relief now accompanies fear.

"Robert, there's something-" she begins, her voice nearly drown in alarm. Something, whatever the Hell it is.

Why is he so calm? Surely he had to have seen it too?

"Shh," Robert replies as he approaches, lifting his hands, bringing them to rest on her cheeks. "It's fine."

"But there's something out there." she replies as she starts towards the door, gun cocked, with Robert gripping her shoulders.

Her fear. It could taste it. Smell it.

No, It won't feed off of her. It must now do what It had tried to avoid.

Fighting the urge to savor her volatile emotions, It moves a palm across her face, her lids flutter as It removes the gun from her hands and places it

on the desk. Her eyes are cast downwards as her breaths begin to steady, her heart rate becoming leisure.

Mirasal sleepily gazes up at Robert. "Um, what was...I was..."

"You had a dream. Nothing more. Just a dream."

"I...did. Um, yes, I did have a bad dream," she puts her hands to her forehead. "You were gone."

"Getting a drink. That's all," Robert coaxes her over to the bed. He slips off her robe and tucks her beneath the covers. "You go back to sleep," he gently slides off her prosthetic. "Remember you don't sleep with this on." It's only moments after that she's deep in slumber, her breathing now serene.

It stood over her, the avatar of Robert having faded into a twisted glossy black insectoid. Its crimson bulging eyes trailing over her form outlined beneath the comforter.

That unpleasant feeling of shame has returned. But the uncomfortable feeling was the price for shielding her from the truth. A truth It couldn't bear for her to know. It had once again been careless in letting her see too much. But It did what was necessary, despite the discomfort of doing so.

It wished It could reveal Itself to her, but her reaction would be unpredictable. Not a risk It can take. She would be repulsed, as evidenced by the fear and disgust It saw in her eyes when she saw It feeding.

As she shifts in her sleep, rolling over, It runs a praying mantis-like limb along her ear and down her mane. It then sees the gun sitting out in the open. Lifting it, It places it back in its place, growling as It catches a fleeting glimpse of the turtle carving before shutting the drawer.

It twists Its body and contorts back into Robert, the lamp turning off. And, once again needing to abide by the laws of a physical form and wanting to escape the troubled thoughts in Its mind, It falls asleep.

"That faca robot almost killed me and you're not doing anything!" Teora shouts, standing square in the middle of the lobby. "How could you *not* hear me yelling? It was like a battle out here!"

Tomah glances around at a few passerby, early risers, awake just before breakfast was to be served. More and more were coming through as the hotel started to come alive. After Radaha arrived, they had all managed to clean up the chaotic scene Richie had caused; broken vases, centerpieces that lay in heaps on the ground and shattered glasses. A small talk with Ellowyn had turned up no explanation for the bot's outburst, other than what she deemed a "malfunction." Tomah and Kikara had been satisfied with her sincerity about her remorse over what the droid had done.

Teora wasn't so easily swayed.

"She tried to kill me! That thing tried to kill me!" she shouts.

"Keep it down," Tomah growls. "It's-

Before he can finish, Ellowyn comes gliding down the staircase, the picture of composure. Richie, however, is nowhere to be found. Teora lingers back behind the others, giving Ellowyn the stink eye as she arrives at the bottom and strolls over to them, smiling.

"Good morning. I hope all is well with you dear." she says as her steely disks land on Teora, whose ears fold back in response to her query. Tomah quickly transfers a telepathic plead.

Don't. She's an important guest.

Teora ignores him, keeping her gaze pinned to Ellowyn, who, despite the waves of animosity directed at her, offers a friendly smile.

"Where's your bot?" Teora asks, her voice a low sneer.

"Shh." Kikara gives her a reproachful glare as Ellowyn comes closer.

"Oh, he's upstairs waiting. I just came down real quick to ask a favor. I just got through speaking with some of my acquaintances, and it seems the venue where the A. I convention was supposed to occur in a few days has now had to cancel, due to unforeseen circumstances," she explains before adding. "It would be a great help if we could have it here."

Kikara and Tomah exchange glances as Radaha focuses on Teora's

horrified countenance. There's an uncertain silence that passes before Kikara shrugs, still exchanging looks with Tomah.

"Uh, I suppose we could." Kikara offers, reticent as Teora rapidly shakes her head in the background.

"Marvelous," Ellowyn beams. "We'll discuss the details later shall we?" She heads back up the stairs, passing her delicate hand along the gold railing, giving them a small wave over her shoulder as she disappears past the balcony.

"Are...you mad?" Teora's arms are folded as she trades her gaze between Kikara and Tomah. "You can't possibly-"

"It's just one day, Tee," Radaha cuts in. "You can maybe take the day off. I'll take over your duties." It was the most she could offer, as she'd failed her last night. Had she stayed later, she could have intervened. Usually, she would have been at the Terog late, making preparations for the next day, cleaning the large amount of dishes, but last night she'd clocked out early out of sheer exhaustion.

Seems while she was in the comfort of her bed, Teora was being terrorized.

"I can't miss pay," Teora, now looking crestfallen, counters. "I shouldn't have to. You need to tell her we can't have it here. We can't." She turns her back to them, Radaha puts her hand on her shoulder. Teora shakes it off.

"It tried to kill me-"

"It's just a stupid robot," Tomah argues. "We should be more concerned about whatever else it is running around here." The empty room Teora had taken refuge in had been where the Muncy family had been staying. The belongings still sitting around was confirmation they had not, in fact, checked out.

More victims. More to hide. But so far, no trace of any physical remains.

"I don't think we need to worry about that," Radaha says coolly. "I think we're safe anyway."

"Why do you think that?" Kikara asks. "You saw what it could do." Another image of Heather Taggart's mangled corpse seeps across her mind, her lids wince shut and a shudder shoots down her spine.

"You haven't noticed? Whatever this thing is, it clearly has a specific taste," Radaha nods towards a couple of human females, chatting among themselves. Radaha keeps her voice relegated to just above a whisper as the women saunter past the four, deep in conversation.

She leans in, motioning for them to come closer. "My people have a Goddess called Kadrees. She enacts retribution upon those who display arrogance. If you show any hubris, she strikes you down, either with disease or bad luck or death. If you're fortunate and she's in a good mood, she'll only give you a dose of humility. Sometimes she unleashes this misfortune in the form of a beast."

Kikara frowns at this. "You're not saying-"

"I am. There's something amiss here. Something else is at work. Its...very specific in what its going after. I mean, look at Gabriel, something clearly went after him-"

"No, it wasn't..." Kikara shakes her head. "That's not, I mean he's-"

"He's not what I would define as humble, Kikara," Radaha gives a roll of her eyes. "His family bought up some land outside Galivo for their factory. Land that belonged to another native family."

"He's *not*-"

"He acts pompous, even you must admit that." Radaha argues. Kikara relents, squeezing her lids and sighing rather than even continue to argue with the sentiment that deep down, she knew was true.

Yes, but that still doesn't mean...

It could possibly be Gabriel's body she sees torn apart next. Another disturbing intrusive thought she shoves aside. She'd suspected Gray was connected, but Gabriel had seemed to dismiss the idea. And perhaps her suspicion was indeed influenced by her dislike of him, as Tomah had said. But Gabriel's suggestion that it was possible spirits was confirmed with the events of last night. After he'd burst into the

kitchen terrified, the night was spent holed up in their room. He'd rambled endlessly about what he'd seen; his dead uncle, the strange creature in the large black hat, the woman floating out of the grotto water. She believed every word of it-his terror had been too real-but also had no explanation.

Whatever it is tormenting them, it's getting more aggressive. Radaha's theory that this was the work of something not of the living world was, strangely, now a real possibility.

And the fact that things were happening to her could be due to her relationship with Gabriel. It was too disturbing to think about.

A punishment for her dalliance with someone who was in, essence, taking from her people. Not to mention her own indiscretions. After all, no one else was seeing and experiencing the things she was.

"What did he see last night?" Radaha blurts out of the blue. Kikara draws a blank as the cook stares her down. Most likely entertaining the same belief; she's complicit.

"Just...something out in the grotto. He just thought he saw something in the water. Just a...false alarm."

"Really? He looked as if he was about to faint." Radaha cocks her head.

"It was...it was nothing."

"You shouldn't be involved with him anyway. It goes against the hotel rules, you know that." Tomah chastises, seemingly thinking the same. Kikara gives a dismissive hand gesture.

"I know."

Radaha continues. "I think we're better off not interfering."

"And? What do you suggest?" Tomah whispers, as he checks to see if any eavesdroppers are present.

"We're not the target. All the victims have been outworlders-specifically human," she gives Kikara an austere glare. "I suggest we

look after ourselves-and each other. Whatever this thing is, I think it's best we just left it alone."

Mirasal wonders through the marketplace that was still enveloped in a thin blanket of morning fog. The early hour meant not many were out at this time. No huge crowds gathered around the booths. The cityscape coated in a dull gray, She had no need to come, except solitude. It was somewhere to go, at least.

She'd crept out of bed discreetly. Robert's behavior in regards to a simple little carving of a turtle had been confusing-and more than hurtful. Then the dream. A bizarre one at that. She vaguely remembered Robert getting up to get a drink. She'd gotten up, perhaps sleepwalking, and took her gun out. The incident was a bit jarring. She wasn't one to sleepwalk.

Robert was still asleep when she'd left. Some alone time was what she needed. He'd probably have his feelings hurt over her sneaking away, but that would make them even in that regard.

As she'd prepared to leave, she, for reasons unknown to her, felt compelled to open the desk drawer and remove the tiny turtle carving, placing it in her purse that hung over her shoulder. Looking at it in her palm, the turtle from her dream enters her mind. Closing her eyes, she pictures herself in that same idyllic setting, which had been a contrast to the ugly emotions of the first half of the dream. She remembered it clearly this time, unlike the other dreams she'd been having, this one was as if she had just experienced it and could remember every small detail. The overwhelming feeling of comfort.

Her gun was discreetly strapped to her thigh under her skirt, the metal cold against her skin as she'd walked out the room's door, sending a passing glance at Robert as she did so.

She'd been met with a barrage of verbal accusations and anger by Teora the moment she'd went downstairs. She hadn't heard her cries for help. Didn't even know the rampaging robot was even at the hotel. She'd hurried away without seeing the others. She didn't need the added stress and conflict. She suddenly stopped in her tracks as a human woman's straw hat catches her attention; it was topped with

two almond-shaped red decorative pieces along a floral arrangement on its rim. She stands blinking at them for a moment before she spies the man standing near the woman as she moves out of sight. A man in a familiar green suit, standing amid a sparse crowd gathered around a clothing booth.

Harold. Perhaps a part of her had hoped to run into him.

She approaches, focused on his wide shoulders, before he turns around, revealing the talisman is now obscured with a dark blue scarf.

"You like it? I just bought it," he asks, fingering the fabric. "Don't I look dashing?"

"Seeing you here again." she says as she comes to a stop before him. He gazes to either side of her.

"And...where is...?" Harold begins.

"You do that too. Ask questions you already know the answer to," Mirasal peers around at the scant group of people. She'll humor him as she does Robert. "At the hotel."

Harold purses his lips, bushy brows arching. "There's some friction between you two."

Mirasal keeps her gaze turned down, examining the tips of her sandals. No need to explain. Harold, without warning, reaches out and gives her a comforting pat on the back.

She jumps slightly at the touch. Harold looks apologetic. "I felt that was necessary. Social protocol." he offers.

"It isn't. I'm fine really," she says raising her head, eyeing the scarf. "Yes that is a good look for you."

Harold lifts his hand towards a cafe, the doors now being opened by an employee. "Why don't we have something to eat."

Mirasal nods. She wasn't even close to being hungry now, but she could use a warm drink.

"Or a drink," Harold adds with a twinkle in his eye as they take a seat inside the small, intimate area, filled with diminutive round tables and the warmth of the oven from the nearby kitchen. "You previously were expressing unhappiness with conversing with me."

"Yes, well...that was before. It's just," Mirasal opens the flap of her purse and removes the turtle carving, placing it on the table in front of them. "This. Can you believe he got upset over this? Why is that? He wouldn't really tell me." She gives it a tap with the tip of her metal finger.

Harold blinks at it for a moment, before he picks it up. "See the Turtle of enormous girth, on his shell he holds the Earth." he says, as his irises pass over the thin delicate lines of the wood.

"Poetry? What's that from?" Mirasal asks.

Poetry or another riddle.

"His thought is slow, but always kind," Harold chuckles before he sits it carefully back down. "Skoldpadda." he adds softly.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's an old poem, about a turtle-one much larger than that. But he can alter his size," he nods at the carving. "He's a creator. A watcher, although," he leans forward, his expression dropping to something more serious. "His thought isn't so slow, if you ask me. Some would call him stupid." He settles back against his chair, attention directed out the small window near them, giving his beard a stroke.

Mirasal remains mute for a few passing minutes. "I...wouldn't," she finally says beneath her breath. "I hope you're not going to talk like that again."

"Like what?"

"In riddles. I can't understand what you say."

"Riddles. Bessa invented them to keep her husband entertained." Harold replies.

"I don't find it entertaining. It's more frustrating," Mirasal shifts in her seat. "I prefer directness."

"So I suppose you wouldn't be interested in a riddling contest?" Harold gives her a knowing smile as he motions a waiter over to them.

"I most certainly would *not*."

They both order the same drink-Caelo-before the waiter heads back to the kitchen, promising to be prompt.

"Very well. I will be straightforward," Harold replies "He has his moods. Certain things can set him off."

"I'm realizing that," Mirasal retorts. "But it seems so absurd to me."

"Maybe to you. But to him...surely you have things you are particular about. Things others might see as trivial or of no importance."

Mirasal stares at him a moment, her bottom lip jotted out as her eyes wonder to the scene outside. Yes, she most certainly does. Without question.

But a *turtle*.

"Sometimes you need to see things from someone else's perspective. Try to put yourself in their shoes."

The image of wearing Robert's dress shoes enters Mirasal's mind before Harold cuts in, waving his hand.

"Figuratively in his shoes. Just seeing things from his point of view."

"Oh," Mirasal slowly nods her head. "Yes, I understand."

"Empathy. To perceive is to suffer, as Aristotle said."

"Poet?"

"Philosopher, scientist," Harold offers. "There was a man I met, who at times seemed rather unsympathetic or cold, but he often tried to

offer his assistance to those who needed it, despite seeming rather detached emotionally. Not really good in 'thinking around corners' as he called it."

Mirasal, taking a sip of the warm Caelo the waiter has delivered, brings her elbows to a rest on the table. "I call that being practical. You can't let your emotions have control over you. You have to see things from a pragmatic point of view."

"Yes, that's true. But there are times when you have to be-

"Open to things? I know." Mirasal smirks.

"That. But that's not always the case. Sometimes being distant can save oneself from harm. You're right that you must be practical. That can sometimes save you from any kind of pain or suffering."

"Not always," Mirasal sits her now-empty mug down, having speedily finished it. "Not always, no. No matter how much I try to distance myself," she starts to rise from her seat. "I should be getting back now." Sometimes she felt she overreacted to certain situations. Maybe she was doing that with Robert's behavior.

"Well, perhaps you should trust that instinct a little more." Harold says as he watches her adjust her shawl. She pauses to look down at him, arms folded, jaw shifting to either side as she gawked at the turtle carving.

"Why don't you just keep that." she says as she slides it towards his side of the table. Harold picks it up, admiring it as it sits in his palm, giving her a silent nod of appreciation as she walks out the threshold.

More crowds are beginning to appear as she strolls down the street. Robert would know they've talked. Know it wasn't by chance. He'd know she'd intentionally interacted with his brother. A feeling of trepidation starts weaving through her as she sees the Terog not far in the distance. She needed someone to talk to. Someone she knew she could trust to confide in, although she certainly doesn't know Harold. But at the same time, felt he was trustworthy. It was a strange feeling. Certainly unusual for her. Trusting this complete stranger with her innermost thoughts. Perhaps it was the kindness he

exudes. That same feeling of comfort she had felt, like when she and her grandfather are conversing. No barriers up.

But, come to think of it, he really didn't even answer her question.

25. Chapter 24

Chapter 24

"Do not allow yourself to be blinded by fear and anger. Everything is only as it is."

— Yuki Urishibara

"Kiki, I was talking to my uncle last night and he's been dead for seventeen years. I saw monsters from my childhood appear before me. Absolutely fucking real. I don't think this is some weird Goddess. I just can't believe that."

Gabriel is stalking back and forth in the room, the curtains closed, the light from the singular lamp dim. A cigarette between his fingers, a snaking path of thin vapor following his movements. He preferred to have the room dark and closed off, almost as a means of protection. Staying hidden from whatever it is lurking outside the door.

In the hotel itself. Concealed. Watching both of them.

"After what you've seen? You can't believe that-" Kikara sits on the unmade bed, arms scissored across her. Her leg is shaking, the result of her increased anxiety. This, coupled with the approaching convention was doing a number on her nerves.

"That I'm getting punished? Both of us? You know my family bought that land fair and square alright? We didn't 'take' anything. That makes no sense. I haven't stolen anything."

"I think you need to maybe leave the hotel. Just keep away. Until this-"

"No. I ain't going anywhere. No. I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Whatever the fuck this thing is, I'm not going to be intimidated." Gabriel fumes as he puffs smoke through his lips. He halts in his frantic strides, his breathing agitated as his expression turns contemplative.

"You know, there was just something familiar about the eyes. All of them had those same fucking eyes. They just looked familiar. Like I've seen them before, but I can't place where."

"Maybe-" Kikara starts before a scraping sound just outside their door cuts her off. Frozen, they peer at each other before Gabriel, scowling, defensively flings it open.

"Don't." Kikara begins, jumping to her feet.

Melissa Cartier is passing by the threshold, dragging a large black trash bag behind her with both hands, barefoot, her bracelets jingling.

"Laundry." she offers flatly upon noticing them observing her. Her hair is frizzy, her clothes somewhat disheveled. Bags prominent under her eye sockets. She continues down the corridor, pulling the bag to the edge of the top of the staircase as Gabriel slams the door shut.

"Man, this place is crawling with whores. Might as well turn it into a bordello. At least that would take care of the tourists." he says as he crushes his cigarette into an ashtray sitting on a wooden stand near the doorway.

Kikara gives a disgusted roll of her eyes as she rises, letting her arms drop to her sides as she begins to leave. Just before she opens the door, Melissa quickly runs back to the middle of the hall and snatches up a pair of bloody spectacles that sat obscured by a potted plant near a corner.

Running back to the top of the stairs, she shoves them into the bag and continues on her way.

Mirasal deftly ducks behind a wall as she sees Kikara approaching, waiting for her to pass. Relieved as her ex-friend quietly eases by, she hurriedly makes her way down the hallway, bumping into Teora rounding a corner, carrying a stack of freshly-cleaned towels, knocking them from her grasp.

"Susa," Mirasal offers, bending down to help Teora collect the scattered cloths. "You know, if I had heard you," she assures. "I would have helped. But I really didn't hear anything."

Teora remains silent as she piles the towels in her right arm. They both rise up in unison, facing each other.

"I know," Teora replies as she clutches the stack to her chest as Mirasal hands her the last one. "I don't understand how nobody heard. It's so strange. Nothing. Everyone I've spoken to has said it was completely silent. How can that be? With all the noise that was happening."

Mirasal solemnly shakes her head. "I...don't know. I don't know what to tell you. But if I had-"

"I know. It's fine." Teora interjects curtly as she continues on her way, heading towards the stairwell. Mirasal watches her for a fleeting second as Teora sprints past one room in particular, giving a worried look over her shoulder as she passes.

The door to the room opens and a gray-haired woman peers out before closing it again.

Mirasal then charily makes her way to her room. She remains standing before it, a mass tightening in her stomach. As she is about to touch the doorknob, it bursts open, the movement making her wince.

Robert stood. Dark half-rings under his eyes, his auburn tuft of hair uncombed with strands falling along his cheekbones. His black vest unbuttoned and the collar of his white dress shirt lopsided.

"Where have you been?" he says, just above a sullen whisper. "Woke up and you were gone."

He knows of course.

"I needed to be alone." she replies, her fingers tightening against the thick crocheted material of her shawl.

"You weren't alone though."

"No, I'll tell you about it."

She saunters in and he slams the door behind her. "I need a drink." he says as he steps over to the nightstand and starts pouring. The bottle is nearly empty.

"Looks like you've had quite a bit already." Mirasal attempts a small smile, but it barely twitches at the sides of her mouth. She lets her shawl drop from her shoulders as she walks to the closet, placing it and her purse on the shelf and her gun promptly back in the desk drawer. She then plops down on the foot of the bed and begins to slide off her sandals. Robert watches her every move with a prolonged stare, sipping his drink.

"You want some?" he finally asks, holding out the bottle and giving it a shake. This was a simple but hopeful gesture.

"No," she replies. "No I don't. It is morning."

"So, why'd you want to be alone?" he asks as he brings the small crystal glass to his lips again.

"Yesterday was good. We had a wonderful time. But then, all of a sudden, you acted a little unreasonable-

"You think it's unreasonable..."

"Just let me finish. I wanted to try to figure out why you don't like..." she peters out under his hardened glare, tucking her head down to peer at her feet, her right foot drumming the carpet.

He already knows. Don't make this worse. You've already conjured up these feelings with your actions. Just remember what Harold said.

"And today you went to see him."

"I happened across Harold, yes. I needed someone to talk to. I didn't really, I didn't actually..." She could say she didn't really intend to, but she'd hoped she would come across him. Robert knows this. He knows everything. Previously, it had been unintentional.

But not this time.

"You can talk to *me*."

"Not when you're acting this way."

"You wanted to see him." he adds, his gaze darting to the windows, before settling on the bottom of his now-empty cup.

"I needed to."

"Why?"

"You weren't forthcoming about...I was just curious-"

"The stu-" he pauses, pressing his lids tight, taking in a deep inhale through his nostrils before continuing. "The turtle."

"Yes. It was-"

"I hate him."

"I know." Mirasal finally cranes her neck to look up at him. How can someone hate their own kin so much? She'd been angry with family in the past, but this boiling hatred was unnatural. Anger is understandable, but the underlying sentiment is always love. You don't shut the person out completely. One must wonder what Harold had done to earn this vitriol.

"You know, but you went and talked to him anyway." he replies as he turns his back to her, his right hand beginning to tighten around the cup. The crisp creaking and crackling of breaking glass is audible as he begins to squeeze, rich streams of blood now forming along his fingers.

Not coursing downwards along his pale skin, but instead floating skyward, trickling, traveling towards the ceiling in shivering runnels. Mirasal gawks, her mouth gaping at the sight.

Smash!

Robert sends the damaged glass hurtling against the wall between the windows above the desk, crumbs of tiny shards snowing down upon its surface, ricocheting off the petals of the rose. Mirasal pulls her

bottom lip in, keeping her head down.

"Do what you want. No one is stopping you." Imarito says as he stands with his back to Mirasal.

"They don't want to stay with you, I don't know what to do. They're scared. We can't come back here, back home until you-" she replies as she puts a small distance between her and her mate.

"What's going to happen to me?" Imarito turns to finally focus on her, a glass in his palms, his lips pursing together as he holds back tears. "I'm scared too. They're going to throw me out. What do I do after that? I'm good at my job, and now they're saying I can't do it." he touches the bandage on his forehead. "That crash didn't change my ability to do my job."

"Nothing will happen to you. They won't throw you out. And we'll get you better, I promise. But they can't stay here any longer." Mirasal pleads, flinching as Imarito slams the cup against the wall.

"Then leave!"

Mirasal's expression is still glued to the floor beneath her, palms cupping her kneecaps. Robert's furious glower melts away as he approaches, towering over her, his features softening as he bends down beside her.

She languidly slides her hands from her legs and places them on the edge of the bed, gripping the material of the comforter, still focused on the carpet. As he reaches up to touch her cheek, she swats at him, growling. She remains mute as Robert lets out a low-pitched snarl as they glare at each other before she rises and stomps over to the bathroom. Locking herself inside, she sits perched on the rim of the tub.

Robert scowls from the other side, his left eye drifting askew as he walks to the door, stringy paths of blood flowing from his hand. "I'm the one who has a right to be angry here." He raises his palms to either side of the door frame, his twitching fingertips starting to extend into sleek talons, fighting the urge to smash in the carved wood.

No, don't do that. Self-control. Its anger over this and the guilt and shame of the events from last night are fueling Its rage.

More fucking emotions It didn't want or welcome.

"You're angry at me when you're the one who was talking to that old fucker? You know how I feel about him! And you went and actually fucking talked to him! Why did you talk to him?!"

Thin red threads start to thicken around his golden disks, nearly blotting out the whites of his eyes.

How dare she try and turn this around on It, when she's the one who ignored Its wishes for her to keep away from that useless one. Actively sought him out and conversed and drank with him. She even gave him that damn carving.

But...

It had behaved irrationally before. Ignored her. Refused to touch her. Turned Its back to her and refused to even look at her. It could sense her hurt and confusion at Its behavior.

It maybe pushed her into speaking with the old lazy one. Maybe she isn't completely at fault for her betrayal.

Maybe.

"Come out." Robert says, anger slipping into mere irritation.

Silence.

Another growl. "Come out," he steps closer, teeth now sharpened into points, placing his right ear against the door. "Goddamn it! Come out!"

The silence doesn't falter. Only the short muffled rumblings of thunder present outside, another sign the storm is still thriving.

Mirasal keeps her hands in her lap, feeling as though the walls are falling down around her. She was numb, her emotions now dulled. The faintest sound of water drips hitting the porcelain bottom of the empty tub seems magnified. She couldn't speak. Didn't want to.

She brings her hands up to place them over her face as she gently rocks. There's now quiet on the other side. She can hear his raspy breathing just behind the door, a snuffle and finally heavy footsteps followed by the squeak of the mattress.

She eventually moves to lounge in the tub, the back of her skull resting against the rim.

It sits on the bed, Its gaze to the bathroom door. Its elbows atop Its knees as It hunches over. It couldn't sense any emotions. Couldn't feel anything coming from her mind. Just emptiness. Like a dry, barren wasteland. A radio with nothing but dead air.

Mirasal doesn't know how long it has been before she decides to stand and head to the door. Maybe an hour. Maybe only a few minutes. Quietly, she steps out. She'd been in the wrong here. She knew how he'd react. Knew he'd get upset. But her desire to find out more about him, to break through that facade he'd built up, had buried whatever reluctance she'd had about seeking out his brother.

In some ways he was a lot like her mother, now that she thought about it. Maybe she should handle him the same way; no questions. Respect his privacy. But she wants *more*. Wants to know about him, his family, his homeworld-his true home. Why he insisted on holding back from her.

She watches him, slumped over, a far-off look on his face as he stares out the window at the blackening clouds.

But this behavior was an extreme reaction. Completely uncalled for. It seems they both had some apologizing to do.

"Susa," she says. "I didn't want to upset you. I didn't intend it."

"Really? You know how much I despise him. You know how I feel about him. I can't believe you willingly spoke with him." he replies, shaking his head. Even from a small distance, she can see his hands trembling.

Mirasal crosses her arms and touches her forehead against the door frame, lids closed, sighing through her nose. "I know. But who else

can I talk to. He's the only one I thought of." Certainly nobody else here.

"I said you *can talk to me*."

"You were ignoring me. Last night, the way you acted-"

Robert squeezes his eyelids, inhaling and exhaling loudly. "I know...I'm...sorry. I didn't mean to be that way. It's just you don't understand." he pauses, dropping his head.

"Then tell me. I will. I'll try anyway. I mean he *is* your brother. I think you two should at least try-" she urges as she steps over to sit beside him.

"He's a fucking traitor." he spits as his wild expression focuses on her.

Mirasal refrains from arguing further. This clearly went deeper than she realized. Far more deeper. Beyond a simple family disagreement. She briefly hesitates before she slides her good arm around him. "It's-"

"Alright. Just forget it. Let's just let it go," he straightens to face her, his mien turning quizzical as he watches her for a beat. "I saw something in your mind-"

It's her turn to shut down the conversation. "Don't ask me about that."

Maybe she's holding back too. Avoiding subjects, ending conversations that make her uncomfortable.

Maybe she can't really complain. It would be hypocritical. He has his moods too, as Harold said.

"You were comparing us." Robert says.

"He behaved this way. But he was sick."

"What was wrong with him?"

Mirasal shifts her legs to cross them, as her arm drops away from his back. "He was in a crash. His ship went down and some of his friends were killed. He wasn't the same afterwards."

"PTSD, huh?"

"You know all of this. Look, if you don't want to talk about your brother, I don't want to talk about Imarito." Mirasal stands and strolls back to the bathroom. She was due for a nice long bath. Her whole body felt as though it was aching.

"That was his name." Robert says as he's at her heels, following.

"You knew what his name was." she says as she bends over to switch on the faucet, the water blasting out. Warm this time, as she anticipated someone wanted to join her.

"No, actually I didn't," Robert enters and shuts the door behind him. "I don't read those memories of yours."

Mirasal pauses to stare at him, blinking back her bewilderment. "Why not?"

Robert shrugs, seemingly just as puzzled as she. "Um, I just don't."

"Mhm." Mirasal undresses and removes her prosthetic, placing it carefully on the sink, and steps into the bath. Settling back, she smiles as she sees him watching with a hint of a smirk, gaze trailing over her frame.

"Stop staring,"

"I'll stare all I want." Robert kneels down by the tub, his injured hand on the side. It looks to be in the process of healing, albeit slowly. His fingertip he'd cut the day before had only just now fully closed up. As good as new. Mirasal takes his injured palm in hers, studying it. She frowns as she kneads it in her fingers. She cocks a brow at the few specks of blood still dripping upwards, dissipating mid-air. She raises a finger to try to dab at them before they evaporate.

"It will heal," he says. "My blood isn't like yours, obviously."

Its blood travels in the direction of the Todash space, like a magnetic pull towards the outside of the realm of the physical. Far outside of this world and others. Of course, It can't divulge that information.

"I can see that." Mirasal replies as she brings his hand up to kiss it. She holds it to her cheek, giving him a warm smile. He then stands and sheds his own clothing. The bath quiet and pleasant. Afterwards, Robert cleans up the broken glass, almost looking embarrassed while doing so.

They then start another lesson, and the day is spent in the room with her teaching him how to write the Terthach alphabet. With both sitting at the desk, as he'd gone and retrieved an extra chair from his room. Using ebony ink and a small brush, he spells out the letters, occasionally getting them backwards, the black lines crooked, wavy.

"My writing isn't that good." he says, trying to steady his hand. A task with his tremors and twitching.

"Neither is mine." Mirasal assures, motioning at her paper. It was an area she struggled with. The fact that she was teaching it was strange indeed. In school, one girl in particular had taunted her repeatedly for her terrible handwriting-and for other things.

"You're thinking." Robert's gazing at her.

"Just some girl who used to tease me, that's all." she shrugs.

"About?"

"My arm-she'd call me 'one arm' or she'd mock my writing and spelling. She'd call me 'stupid.'"

"You're not."

"Well, I was called the 'stupid' girl," she frowns. "I remember once, I tried to stand up to her and she threw me into a bush," she pauses, before continuing. "She was bigger than me. I couldn't really fight her."

"You could now," Robert grins as he dips the bristles of his brush into the inkwell. "You can certainly kick her ass now."

Mirasal smiles wide. "I wouldn't have to. I'm sure she's changed. She's probably got children, a mate."

"Don't be so sure. Sometimes they stay assholes," he offers as he begins writing out another letter. "I've seen how some turn out. You get these ones who bully other children. Torture animals. They're 'bad seeds' from the start, so to speak."

"Maybe." Mirasal replies, nibbling her lip as she glances out the window at the gentle mist of rain starting to softly rap against the windows.

As the evening draws near and eventually passes into night, they sneak down to the kitchen after-hours to get some food. Bringing it back up to the room, they eat and listen to the radio.

"What should we read tonight?" Mirasal queries, thumbing through the selection of Arnamina's poetry books.

Robert slides his arms around her waist. "No reading," he mumbles, nibbling at her neck.

She rests her back against his torso, nuzzling her head into his shoulder. They waste no time in peeling off their garments and tumbling onto the bed. Afterwards, she rests her head on his chest, her flesh arm draped over him, feeling the quiet vibrating of his purring. He runs his wounded fingers through her mane, massaging her ear, both still trembling from their mutual climax.

"Tell me about your home-your real home." she asks, trailing her hand up along his flat stomach.

"You want to see it?" he replies as he lifts his fingertips to touch the vertical stripes down her forehead. She draws in a gasp as she sees an orange-yellow galaxy swimming with clusters of stars, a large planet with a storm swarming along the surface. Just beyond are a series of smaller worlds, each painted with black silhouettes, surrounded by bursts of multi-colored dust particles and a comet shooting across, cutting through the sky. A massive fiery quasar burns hot in the center. Everything then begins to blur together, as if she is traveling at light speed, seeing sparks of flames shooting out either side of her peripheral. A larger planet lush with green landscapes and deep blue water comes into view. Just as she comes into contact with the surface, he removes his fingers and the vision ends.

"Oh, that was," she whispers. "That was beautiful. That isn't like anything I've seen before. Was that, the last one, was that Eartho?"

"Yes. When I first arrived. It seems like an eternity ago."

"How old are you? If you don't mind me asking?"

Robert chuckles, a wide grin breaking out as he squirms underneath her. "That's a tricky question. I guess you can say I'm as old as the oldest universe."

Mirasal raises her head slightly to look at him, eyes widened. "You're really?"

He has that same expression again. Somber. Serious.

"Haven't I been truthful about everything? I wouldn't say it if it weren't so," he replies. "I'm older than your radio."

"I never really know when you're joking," she offers as she lowers her head back down against his chest, absorbing this information, before she finally props up on her elbows, her stunned countenance inches from his. "You're that old? Really? How can that even be? That's just unfathomable."

"It just is. I am."

Mirasal keeps her gaze on him. A part of her wondering when he's going to break out that playful grin and admit he's joking.

But he doesn't.

She brings her hand up to push aside a few strands of stray hairs away from his youthful face with the large heavy-lidded eyes, full lips and boyish button nose. A face that's a million years old.

Shapeshifter. Can heal himself. His blood floats.

Now it seems he's older than the stars themselves. He really is like some kind of God straight out of mythology. This is another revelation she'll have to adjust to.

"I don't age the way everyone else does. Not your kind. Or humans. Or really any other species." he says.

"So," she brings her metallic palm up to cradle her chin. "As I grow old, you'll remain looking the same."

Robert frowns at this. "I can look any way. Young or old. I just don't really age the same way."

It has never pondered this; aging. Old age. Humans aged and returned to the weeds, their bones the only fragment left of their hollow, empty lives. Their flesh having been consumed by worms. Marked by a stone bearing their name.

Mike. Mike is the only one It knows was still living when It fled Earth. He'd outlived the other hated ones. Lived a long, not always happy life. It had not bothered to confront him. He sat in a retirement home, forgotten. The years had not been kind to him. Trying to milk fear from his feeble state would have been futile.

Mirasal moves to place her forearms across his chest. "I can imagine what you've seen though. What you've experienced. The stories you can tell."

"I'm like an antique," Robert wiggles his brows, pulling her down to him. "If you want to hear them all. It would take a while."

"We have time." she smiles as she removes her metal limb, situating it on the nightstand before she brings her cheek back down to rest on his shoulder and soon, she's sound asleep.

It snaps Its fingers, switching off the lamp. It remains alert, awake as she slumbers. Watching her closely as her breathing slows. It is no longer eternal. That It is certain of. It had been made aware of Its mortality. Its encounter with the hated ones had led to that realization.

And the Other.

But time. Time they did not have. Only a year. A year is hardly long enough to share with her all Its stories. Its life experiences. Many of which would be outside of her understanding. Her own experiences. Her mortal brain can only soak up so many impossibilities.

As It stares at her, It decides to take a walk into the landscape of her mind. Easier when she's unguarded. Nothing blocking. Vistas of her life fly by; It sees her childhood, the confrontation with the bully, her arguments with her mother, playing with her sisters, talking to her father, although those are few. Interacting with fellow soldiers, flying a ship, staring at a screen displaying maps. Firing a gun.

It continues viewing her memories until It reaches her interacting with what could only be the dead man. As the man leans in to kiss her as they hug. It flinches, immediately pulling out of her mind as repulsion warms over It, yanking Its hand away and wanting to move out from beneath her, but not wanting to disturb her.

Disgusting.

That feeling of revulsion coupled with an odd, entirely new feeling. One It never felt before. Odd and surprising. Its disgust at seeing her affection with the dead man. Disgust and...

Envy. That feeling It knew existed but never experienced.

It had avoided seeing these memories. Before due to lack of interest. Now, It felt uneasy to view them. It didn't want to see her touching, smiling, kissing the dead man.

But why?

It had, though It would loathe to admit, wondered what having a mate would be like. Wondered what a life without solely feeding, sleeping and dreaming would encompass. But It had previously, brushed those thoughts aside. It preferred alone.

At least It thought It did.

Mirasal starts to shift, her body squirming as she lets out a muffled whimper into his chest. Her movements become rougher as she starts to dig her nails into Robert's skin.

"Ah-" he flinches at the needling pain stinging his chest. He attempts to grip her wrist as she grows more erratic, eyes still shut. He is then met with a burning slap to his cheek.

"Ow! Dammit!"

Her eyes shoot open as she scrambles to the edge of the bed, making her way to the wall by the desk, her frantic features obscured by the curtain as she cradles her knees to her body, rocking, her confused stare fixed to the other side of the room.

Robert makes his way from the bed, moving slowly. He comes to a rest before her as she cups her hand over her face. Just as he reaches out to touch her, she swats at him.

"No, don't touch me."

"You had a nightmare." he replies as he retracts momentarily, before he reaches out again.

"No," she offers more forcefully. "*Don't.*"

Robert swiftly moves to place his hands behind her back and under her knees, a growl faint in the thick of his throat. He picks her up with her not giving much resistance, despite her protests.

"No, don't *touch* me." she orders again as he carries her back to the bed. Setting her down upon the mattress, he crawls over her to his side, pulling the blankets back over them. She glares at the ceiling as he covers her back up. She finally turns her scowl towards him. Propping up on his side, he touches her forehead, the anger and panic now starting to drain from her expression. Sighing, she relaxes, her tense muscles loosening.

As slumber takes her again, the turmoil in her mind now quieting, It peers once again into the panorama of her memories. Seeing fire. Fire and flashes of the bottom of a steep cliff with ocean waves crashing below against sharp rocks.

And a woman screaming.

It passes Its palm over her head, inserting calming thoughts; frolicking through a field with her friend, fishing with her father, her mother's cakes, her grandfather's voice. All of these are pleasant, happy, soothing.

Influencing happiness. This is most certainly a first for It. It only

influenced fear, hatred, violence, greed, envy. Torment and evil. Nightmares to be brought to life, to feed Its insatiable hunger. Never a reverie of loved ones and the comforts of home.

As a serene smile edges on her lips as she drifts off, the more pleasant thoughts singing her to sleep, It stares at her still visage, brows creasing as a realization blooms. One It had been ignoring and pushing into the darkness of Its mind. Hoping it would fade, that it would be smothered. Snuffed out. But, It can no longer ignore the truth.

That It is completely infatuated with her.

26. Chapter 25

Chapter 25

"How shallow to presume war exists only within the physical world. Battles are waged for mind and soul, where things far from comprehension are confronted."

— Christopher Hawke, Unnatural Truth

"Open the fuckin' door." Jessica Cobb gripes as she bangs on the door of the room she's sharing at the Terog with her boyfriend, Luke Brady and his younger brother Noah. The arrangement, however, was leaving her sour due to the lack of privacy and the younger boy's obnoxious personality. Always touching. Always fidgeting. She'd caught him snooping through her suitcase earlier, touching her bras, underwear and other private items. The trip was less enjoyment and more babysitting.

"Jesus, what the Hell? I said to leave it unlocked," she says, her glare at Luke unwavering as she sat the breakfast tray on the bed.

"Must of been me when Noah went out."

"Where is the little shit anyway?"

"Already out by the grotto, gettin' in the mud. The rain's let up, so he wanted out. Sorry about earlier," Luke gives his scalp a small scratch, flicking his dark blonde fringe out of his eyes. "He's just really curious."

"He's a little pervert is what he is," Jessica replies, fingering the spaghetti straps of her black tank top as she crosses over to the bathroom. "Ya' know the staff wouldn't even bring that tray up. So lazy. I mean if we-you-are paying, they should do their damn jobs."

Thankfully, Luke's wealthy parents were paying for this trip. The management position at the Castle Rock Diner back home didn't pay nearly enough for such a splurge to be possible for her. All her vacations had been to a nearby beach.

"Still don't understand why he had to tag along. Thought it was supposed to be just you and me?" she says, snapping on the bathroom light and standing before the large square mirror.

"I'm sorry. I had to bring him," he pauses. "They wouldn't pay for it if I didn't."

Jessica brushes her long dark brown locks while staring at her reflection. "Yeah, whatever."

She finishes and shuts off the light. Just as she exits, a pair of glowing yellow specks appear in the mirror.

Noah is traipsing along the sleek mud-caked rocks surrounding the grassy edge of the grotto, skipping along, carrying a small plastic toy squid. Just as he comes to a group of bushes, a hand grabs him from behind, cupping his mouth and getting him in a smothering headlock as he's violently pulled backwards towards the cave entrance. His arms are flailing as he struggles to scream.

Melissa forcibly drags the boy, dropping his toy as he works to pry her arm loose, the soles of his sneakers creating tracks along the miry cave ground as she comes to a halt deep inside. The area has cocoon-like sacks dangling from the ceiling and cobwebs as large as buildings inching out along the rocks.

Standing before a large stalagmite, Melissa waits.

Waits for It. The thing she's heard cooing to her in her ear, speaking to her in her thoughts. Appearing before her in her dreams. Promising vengeance against those who've wronged her.

Still in Melissa's grasp, her palm still clamped over his mouth, Noah watches with bulging eyes as something starts to manifest in the center of a pool of murky water near them. At first only a hint of vibrant orange-yellow glow reflecting along the ripples of the bubbling surface, then a ghostly white face streaked with crimson breaks through, gradually revealing a tall, lanky clown with an fiery tuft of hair adorning his massive cracked noggin and off-white ruffled suit. His scorching golden-yellow eyes stay pinned to Noah as he

steps forward.

Noah stops fidgeting to free himself as the shock of what he's seeing renders him frozen in place. The clown is seemingly now bone-dry as leans his thin frame closer to take a loud sniff of the boy's hair, arms draped behind his back. His breath reeks of blood and decay.

"Tasty," the clown grins obscenely as he straightens. "Beautiful, delicious fear." The most poignant It has had in a while. The kid was terrified, and It had to do very little to bring it out.

It looks at the human female. She'd been useful in cleaning up Its last victims. She'd also delivered the corpses of her johns It had influenced her to kill. Corpses to be stored for later use. She was an instrument. A tool. Her mind had required some tweaking, but the seed had already been there. Burrowed deep. It just needed watering. To be nourished, encouraged. Fed.

It now wanted to spend less time on hunting, more on simply feeding. It did not want to keep Mirasal waiting. Its desire to be near her was outweighing the need to chase prey. At this point, It found it time-consuming.

It motions for Melissa to pull the boy further into the depths of the caverns. As they delve deeper, a clearing comes into view with a massive hole in the earth. A seemingly bottomless pit with an enormous stalagmite protruding up from the center. Circling it is an array of bodies; human men, women and children floating in a circle, gliding quietly, undisturbed.

Turning to Noah, It gestures with a quick nod of Its head for Melissa to release him. The boy is still chilled to the bone with fear. His gaze shifting between the hideous clown creature and the odd sight of floating corpses. Unable to speak.

It takes a moment to siphon off the terror the child is exuding, closing Its eyes, breathing It in, before giving another cursory nod of Its head at Melissa, who presents a knife from her denim jacket pocket and proceeds to slash the boy's throat.

It then devours the child, removing the bones, ripping the limbs from the torso. Melissa observes stone-faced. Blood splatters sprinkling her blue

jeans and white boots.

It would save the rest for later. The meat left over would be wrapped in the silken cases where It stored the mangled half-eaten limbs It didn't entirely consume.

It sends Melissa back out to continue her stalking around the hotel, either luring children herself or pointing It in the direction It needed to locate one. It then influences the boy's older brother, implanting thoughts, his already-troubled mind now blooming with the belief that his girlfriend murdered his little brother. The woman had done a stint in Juniper Hill Asylum, so it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for her to commit a heinous act of violence against a child she already clearly hated.

It then exits the cave as Gray once again, and sees him.

That fucking Turtle.

"Greetings. Lovely morning isn't it? I'd ask you to breakfast, but I suspect you've already eaten," Harold smirks, removing his pipe from his jacket pocket. Snapping his fingers, the pipe's bowl sparks and begins to gradually smoke. "You know Albert Einstein believed pipe-smoking contributed to calmness and objectivity," he smirks again, removing the mouthpiece. "You might benefit from smoking a pipe once in a while."

It growls as It glowers at Harold from across the water. Teleporting in front of him, It snatches him by the flaps of his green suit jacket and violently pushes him back against a tree, Harold's body seemingly levitating from the ground as It holds him up. His pipe falling from his lips.

"You see? Your temper, once again, is getting the best of you, dear brother." Harold says in a insouciant cadence, remaining still as his brother keeps him pinned against the bark.

"I told you to stay away from her," It snarls as spittle shoots from Its curled lips, teeth now razors, Its pupils flashing fiery yellow within crimson circles. It wrangles Harold by his lapels and hurls him against another tree, the fabric of his suit still crushed between Its fingers. "Stay away. You're trying to poison her thoughts against me. I

know it."

"You're doing a fine job of that on your own. She's already seen your ugly side-just not the ugliest parts," Harold retorts. "You care so much about what this mortal thinks," he places his hands over Its wrists. "Why is that?" he chuckles to himself before continuing. "You actually have real feelings towards this woman. I would have never thought it possible."

"I just need a distraction-"

"Oh, come on, you can't lie to me. You never could. You know that."

The turtle carving suddenly tumbles from Harold's suit pocket, dropping at Its feet. It glances down at the wooden figurine before letting out a throaty roar and hurling Harold aside, sending him rolling along the mushy grass, just short of the water's edge.

Harold remains down, laughing, staying in place on his side as he gazes up at It, lifting himself up on his arms. "My brother is in love. Never thought I'd see the day," he gradually stands, placing the carving back in his pocket and retrieving his pipe, still laughing derisively. "The Eater of Worlds. The Disease of Derry. The Horror Under Neibolt is actually in love. And with a mortal to boot. Thought they were beneath you, Toys to be played with. Nothing more," he pauses, his mirth dissipating as his brows crease together, now glaring at It. His own irises now baring the faintest hint of intense yellow sparks.

"You should have stayed dead." It says.

"Yes, sometimes that is better, isn't it?" Harold brushes the grass residue from his jacket. "There are moments when I wish that had been my fate."

"I can certainly rectify that for you." It replies as It sees the talisman around Harold's neck, It quickly reaches to tear it off, giving a soft growl when it scorches Its palm, leaving a steaming mark as he yanks it away.

"You should know better than that," Harold shakes his head, tucking

the necklace under his collar. "You can't touch the ta-rem."

"You told her about that." It grips Its wrist as It surveys the damage to Its flesh, the skin already starting the process of healing itself, scabbing over.

"You've revealed more to her than I have. She's seen too much already." Harold counters.

"She can handle it. She knows I'm not..." It stops, wiping Its nose, glancing off at the distance towards the hotel.

It couldn't keep her waiting any longer.

"She knows what you show her-which is false. With your little illusions and parlor tricks. You're pulling the wool over her eyes. The moment it's torn away she's going to see you for what you are. And do you think she's going to walk, with open arms, into that?" Harold steps closer, face hovering near Its. "She's got a life. Children. A family. What do you have?"

"I had children," It somberly whispers. "You helped with that."

"You brought it on yourself."

It keeps Its detached gaze ahead, hearing only Harold's voice, almost disembodied. It suddenly rears up and swings at him, snarling, striking only air as Harold has vanished.

Gone. Good riddance.

Looking around with Its lip curled, eyes boring through the trees, trying to find any sign that his brother was still around. Then It stalks off towards the hotel's back entrance, mumbling expletives.

In the bushes nearby, a dark-haired figure is watching as It retreats.

"Did you enjoy that? I didn't." Robert muses, a dissatisfied mien breaking out as he wraps an arm around Mirasal. Trying to talk above the crowd that is gathering as evening cloaks Galivo. The little hints of sunlight through the clouds now drowning out completely.

They'd gone to see an afternoon performance of the play by the famed Thyrcenian poet Tarla Gathra.

"It was your idea to go." Mirasal responds, gazing at him with a smirk.

"I know, but it was a little lifeless. It also seemed unending."

"Her works are that way. Very long. Had it been the entirety of the poem, we would have been there all night." Gathra's writings were also extremely morbid-usually with themes of death, murder, lost love and rebirth.

"I wanted the woman to just forget the man. He was kind of an asshole." Robert muses.

"Well, he was more preoccupied with himself. Taking her for granted." Mirasal replies.

"It would have been far more entertaining had everyone onstage had suddenly started doing the Peppermint Twist. To lighten things up at the end."

Mirasal stops and stares. "The *what?*"

"This." Robert pauses in the middle of the cobblestone street and starts doing odd movements with his legs and arms. Onlookers stop to gawk at him, some smiling and laughing, others making a point to back away from him. Mirasal can't help but crack up at the sight-both Robert's spontaneous dance and the spectator's reactions.

Laughing, she shakes her head. "I've *never* seen that before. Ever!"

Robert grins. "It was an Earth dance. You haven't heard of it? C'mon!" he gestures for her to join, trying to maneuver her out to the street. Mirasal backs away from him, still laughing.

"No, I can't." she says as she dismissively waves her hands.

"Alright," Robert mocks-frowns as he ceases his dance moves. "Be that way."

"It's just, not in the open."

"I know," Robert adjusts his gray suit jacket, fingering the lapels, smiling. "You're bashful."

"No," she insists. "I'm just-"

"It's okay, I know you are. But I like your shyness," he returns his arm along her shoulders. "So, where are we going now. Where's this get-together at?"

"Friends of mine from my unit. It's just a small gathering. They have it every year to celebrate Kalendo."

"What's that?"

"It's a holiday to celebrate Araseza and her many blessings. It doesn't hold any significance for me, though. They're always inviting me and I don't usually attend."

"Why now?" Robert queries as he sidesteps a few patrons passing by.

"I thought it would be a good learning experience for you." Mirasal explains.

"Why the crowd, though. Seems like more than usual." Robert gazes out at the burgeoning number of people, all natives, children and adults alike, bustling around them. Their excited chatter filling the now-darkening sky.

"They're preparing for the Kalendo Sky Festival. Many come from all over to attend the one here in this city." The week-long festival in Galivo was considered the most magnificent, with parades and elaborate costumes celebrating Araseza and the dawn of a new year. The festivities also included mhalai-lanterns to be released into the air as gifts to the Goddess.

They stroll along the street until they come to a building decked out with orange-yellow triangular-shaped paper lanterns strung along the front, the windows lit up, with guests already spilling out the front entrance, murmuring among themselves.

"Here we are." Mirasal declares as they enter, snaking their way through the attendees. A Thycentian woman with a wild thick bushy mane of brown ringlets comes running to them.

"Mirasal! You made it!" she beams. Her twinkling caramel eyes then land on Robert, the smile of elation now one of puzzlement.

"Yes, this is Robert Gray," Mirasal nods at her uninvited guest. "I hope you don't mind."

Robert gazes down at her, blinking, arching his brows, speaking to her mentally.

Friend?

I don't know what to call you. We're not really mates now, are we? We don't have a word for what we are.

The question of the courtship box has remained unanswered.

Oliba's cheery voice interrupts their telepathic conversation. "Of course. More is always good." She steps aside and lets them enter further.

"Where's Jaehet?" Mirasal queries.

"He's off going mad with the wine out back," Oliba laughs. "He'll be having a headache come morning. Good thing we're on leave right now."

Mirasal gives an affirmative nod as they walk into the scene, guests are pouring drinks and chatting merrily, nibbling on food and laughing heartily. Mirasal and Robert head to a small unoccupied marble table in the corner of the large room. The walls are a faint orange, as the those same paper lanterns placed around the tables and along the stairwell are giving off a soft, understated glow. Oliba comes over to briefly drop off a bottle upon the tabletop.

"Here," she says as she places two cups in front of them, winking. Oliba's family owned a wine business and she usually received the newest flavors for free. "It's a new one."

Mirasal pours her glass and sips, spitting it back out into the cup, her face scrunching up. "Ugh, too bitter." The Narculli she could handle, this one was much too strong. Before Robert can offer a teasing response, a shadow falls over the table.

"Once you get used to it, it's good." says a young Thycentian male standing by them, his own drink in hand.

"Seno," Mirasal smiles. "It's been a long time."

"I've been busy. Work and all. I almost didn't recognize you. You look different." he replies.

"I do? How so?" Mirasal is still smiling wide. Robert keeps his focus on her, taking slow swigs of his drink. He then leisurely grabs the bottle to add to the remaining liquid. He slouches against the back of the chair and continues sipping.

"Well," Seno stands back and touches his chin, regarding her a moment. "I think it's your mane. It looks longer than before. I remember it being shorter."

"I haven't trimmed it in a while."

"So how have you been? I hope you are doing better, since I heard about... I mean, I heard about what happened..." Seno bites his lip, petering out as he momentarily looks to Robert.

"Oh, I am. It's alright. Grazach," Mirasal gestures at Robert, his cheeks now turning up in a forced smile. "This is Robert. Robert Gray," she nods before she continues. "Seno is a friend of mine. We lived right by each other growing up. We used to play together."

"Then she moved away when she went into the military and I only saw her occasionally after that. The last I saw her was maybe three nerons ago." Seno adds.

With that, Robert roughly places the cup down and looks up. "How ya' doin' there, *Seno*."

Seno nods, a sheepish smile twitching up, rapping his fingertips against his glass. "Um, good. Very good. Mind if I join you-"

"Yes." Robert blurts out, his inflection low and raspy. Mirasal's scowling eyes dart to him.

"I mean, yes you can." Robert clarifies, briefly meeting Mirasal's disapproving glare.

Seno casually pulls out a chair and sits. There's a few beats of awkward silence as the guests continue their animated conversations, the sounds of the sparkling wine meeting the bottom of the glass cups and a female Thycentian singer warbling in the background.

"So, what do you do? You look like a business man." Seno inquires at Robert.

It sees in his mind, thoughts. Feelings. Amorous ones. A childhood infatuation that has persisted. Persisted through distance. Through the heartbreak of her being with another.

An infatuation that, at one time, was reciprocated. When they were children.

But no more on her end.

The dead man stood in his way before. It sees a conversation between the two, with Mirasal expressing hurt at him not attending her wedding ceremony with the dead man.

His condolences were merely a mask. His friendliness towards It forced.

"Robert." Mirasal whispers as she touches his forearm, giving him a gentle shake. Robert's eyes have drifted in opposite directions, prompting Seno to comment, "Is he alright?"

Robert suddenly perks up. "I'm fine. I sell antiques. Old shit nobody wants to bother with anymore," Robert chuckles, his golden disks now focused. "Though, I sometimes think things from the past should sometimes stay there, don't you think?"

Seno gives another diffident smile. "Yes, I suppose. Mirasal, I remember likes antique items. You still got that old radio?"

"I do."

Oliba comes rushing over to their table, concerned intonation. "Mirasal can you come with me? It's Jaehet. You're...needed."

Mirasal rises up. "I'll be right back." she assures as she follows her friend, hurriedly vanishing through the party-goers. Seno also starts to rise up.

"No, no, stay," Robert orders, pounding the top of the table. "Stay and chat."

"...Chat?"

"Yes, meaning talk. "

Seno remains standing, blinking at Robert, before lowering himself back down to his seat.

"So, what does your name mean?" Robert sits back, taking small sips, his stare pointed.

The young man shifts in his chair, a tingling, icy shiver makes its way down his spine. "Um, bold."

Robert gives a broad grin, sitting up. "No kidding? Isn't that funny. Talk about the name not fitting the personality."

Seno examines his glass, dropping his head down. "It was my ahauvo's name. He was a war veteran." he finally mumbles.

"Isn't that *fascinating*." Robert replies, the light from the lanterns casting tiny circles within his irises, and for a moment, he looks like he has two suns in his eyes.

It knows more about her than him. More than he's ever seen or ever will. It knows every little thing about her at this point. Its seen her dreams, her memories, her fears, her pain. It knows her through and through. This man has barely scratched the surface.

He's known her longer, but It knows more.

"You two came together? You're friends, huh...?"

"She's teaching me about your culture. Although," Robert leans back, gulping the rest of his wine. "I wouldn't say we spend a whole lot of time talking."

Just then, Mirasal returns to the table, almost bumping into Seno as he rapidly leaps up and takes his leave, throwing glances back at them over his shoulder. Mirasal stands watching his retreat, before pointing in his direction, a silent question evident.

"He needed to leave. Emergency apparently. We had a nice conversation, though," Robert grins and raises his empty glass. "So, everything alright?"

"It was Jaehet. He's had a little too much of the wine and was having a quarrel with a guest. We didn't want it to escalate into-"

"Violence?"

"Yes." Mirasal pulls her chair back up as she sits.

"Too bad. I would like to see you put a beatdown on someone."

Mirasal gives him a playful swat to his arm. "No, violence is never good. If it can be avoided."

"Sometimes it can't. It's a part of life. Violence is instinct," he leans forward, quieting his voice. "It was your instinct to defend your mother that one time, right?"

"Hey, are you a whore like your mother?" the human soldier loudly asks Mirasal as he sat upon a curb nearby, to the snicker of his fellow soldiers. His unit was stationed near hers, and he'd been making snarky remarks towards both her and her own unit mates.

Mirasal slowly turns to face him, arms unfolding. She strolls over, now standing before him gazing down.

"What did you say?"

"Sorry, I thought those enormous ears meant you freaks had excellent hearing. I said 'are you a whore like y-'"

Mirasal's metal fist meets the side of the man's face. Blood and saliva drips spraying from his mouth as he falls over. Grabbing him by the hair as his helmet topples off, Mirasal strikes his head against the pavement, blood flecking along the concrete. A pair of hands grab her shoulders from behind as she continues to strike.

"Mirasal stop!" Esida cries as she and Caldoris wrestle her away as she continues to swing at the man. As they manage to hold her back, she remains glaring down at him, teeth bared as his fellow soldiers run to him.

"Yes," Mirasal breathes, almost inaudibly. "Why don't I introduce you to Jaehet."

As the evening progresses, the four sit and talk until Oliba announces it's time for the lantern release.

"It's time. Get a mhalai." she announces as she directs everyone outside the back of the building. Overlooking the large canal, the clouds have cleared long enough for the four moons and stars dotted along the blue-black sky to be visible.

"Looks like the weather God is being good to us tonight." Oliba declares as everyone individually takes a paper lantern and stands beside each other.

Robert tilts in towards Mirasal to mutter, "Weather God?"

"He's called Macias," Mirasal whispers back. "We have Gods and Goddesses for everything."

Just as each lantern's candle is being fired up one at a time, It sees a flash of green in the crowd.

What the fuck is that asshole doing here?

Harold is standing, inconspicuous despite his bright garb, among the gatherers, holding his own lantern. Disappearing behind a passerby as they brush past. Appearing again, only closer, in a flash as another attendee blocks Its view.

A guttural, insidious growl emanates from Robert as he keeps his glower on his brother-slash-nemesis, causing Mirasal to look at him,

startled.

"What? What is wrong?"

"Nothing." he sneers as he keeps his gaze locked into the crowd, pupils dancing back and forth as he peers around. Giving his head a rapid shake, he tries to hide his agitation.

"It's really nothing at all." he replies, switching on a warm smile, rubbing her back.

"Here, it's going." Mirasal begins to lift up her lantern as the fire ignited inside starts to make it rise upwards from her fingers.

"It's floating." Robert gives a child-like grin as it leaves his hands.

Simultaneously, the mhalai are released into the night sky, their yellow luminance blanketing the onlookers and streaking the murky water in vibrant pools of light. As they continue to rise up into the air, the spectacle looking not unlike giant fireflies marching amid the clouds, drifting further upwards. The flame at the center of each softly flickering inside.

Mirasal remains staring at the spectacle. "It's good luck," she says. "Like all your problems are just floating away with the breeze."

Robert breaks his gaze away from the sea of orange lights overhead, growing more distant, in order to scan the onlookers once again.

If only that were true.

27. Chapter 26

Chapter 26

"A widespread meticulous consistency causes a bigger suspicion than the most obvious inconsistency does."

— Pawan Mishra, Coinman: An Untold Conspiracy

The disappearances were piling up; Mr. Dobson was nowhere to be found, Mrs. Dobson left the hotel without uttering a word, dead-eyed and completely apathetic to her son and husband's fate. A kid named Brandon, the girl Emily and others. Most of them had loved ones who initially showed signs of distress, but just as quickly, evaporated into stark indifference.

As if said relatives never existed.

Others had no relatives. No friends on the planet to notice they've been snuffed out of existence.

The stress was now causing tempers to flare, both among the guests and the staff. Another fight in the dining hall, screaming matches between whole families, a male tourist had taken a swing at Tomah with his wife threatening Radaha, who countered by threatening the woman with her spatula. Human children running amok, which lead to broken items in the rooms and around the hotel that the parents refused to pay for.

The robot convention was only a day away, the various inventors were already starting to show up and book their rooms. Many of them had their creations in tow, leading to a spike in Teora's anxiety. She was now refusing to go anywhere near Ellowyn's room, the reason she refused a young human woman's request to deliver a breakfast tray.

A fight, however, had erupted between the young woman and her male companion. Behind the door their raised voices about a missing room key turned into a violent confrontation. When the other guests complained, Kikara visited the room, with the young man reluctant

to speak with her, his girlfriend in tears sitting upon the bed. The door was only opened slightly ajar as Kikara tried to glean information from both before it was slammed shut with a single "fuck off" uttered.

As the hotel prepared for dinner, her energy depleted, Kikara sat near the lobby entrance, soaking up a rare moment of not needing to tend to any of the guest's needs. Or rather demands. Gabriel comes to stand by her, resting his hand on her left shoulder, softly massaging it.

"How is it?" he asks sympathetically.

She gives a lazy shrug. "Alright. The usual. Getting screamed at, insulted. Tired of it," she replies, touching his hand and giving it a gentle squeeze as she manages a feeble smile. "You?"

As far as their unseen tormentor, it had been quiet on that front. At least for now.

"Fine. Yeah, look, I, uh, need to tell you something. Later if you're not too exhausted. It's about-"

Just then, Robert and Mirasal step into the lobby, with her smile dropping as she is met with Kikara's glower, an angry front that gradually morphs into one of sadness.

Mirasal's own gaze quickly darts away and meets the floor as she keeps her arm linked with Robert's. As they walk towards the main stairwell, Robert looks back at the two lovers, with his silky golden pupils locking with Gabriel's.

Upstairs, after they've finished eating, Mirasal is seated on a chair in the middle of the room. Robert is standing before her, his finger gently under her chin to guide her face, moving it to exactly the position he needed it. He'd gotten the sudden urge to paint.

"There," he says. "Now let me get started." he says as he heads over to his easel set with a fresh canvas. That, along with his paints and palette, he'd retrieved from his room.

"How long have you been painting?" she asks. "You really do have many talents, don't you?"

"Eh, well. Not too long. Sort of on and off. But that face needs to be immortalized." he grins as Mirasal gives him a flash of a slightly-embarrassed smile, before her expression sinks into somberness.

"Don't think about her."

"I know. It's just-"

"Let it go. She's not your friend, I told you." Robert urges.

He starts stroking the brush, moving it along the canvas, a short stretch of silence passes before she squirms in her chair.

"So, what was the growling?"

Robert pauses. "That. I saw someone-"

"Harold." Mirasal finishes pointedly.

"Yeah."

Mirasal moves a tendril of hair out of her vision. "Wonder what he was doing there. Oliba couldn't have invited him. Or Jaehet."

"Being a pain in the ass, as usual," Robert rolls his shoulders before dunking his brush into a crystal glass of water upon the desk. "Spying."

"Why?"

"Hell if I know. I don't know why you like him. You wouldn't if you knew him like I did."

"I don't like him."

"You do." Robert keeps his eyes focused on his work, a mild scowl starts to shadow across his face. Annoyed, but not angry.

At least, he didn't seem to be.

"Well, he just doesn't seem too bad to me, I suppose." But, what would she know? Robert knows his own blood, she didn't. But still, that feeling of comfort, warmth, Harold exuded was enough to make her second-guess.

She, however, didn't get that same air from Robert. She felt at ease around him, in regards to her habits, being able to at least be herself. But at the same time, there was a conflicting feeling of something being off. Something she couldn't place. He seems non-judgmental and open, but that air of security didn't exist with him as it did with Harold. It wasn't until she'd spent enough time with the latter to know the difference.

Perhaps it's her own paranoia about insincerity. She brushes them aside for fear Robert might be lurking around her mind again. She didn't feel the throbbing, and he seems to be preoccupied with his painting, so he may not have noticed.

A short time passes with no words spoken, only him gesturing for her to move her face this way, that way.

If he did notice, he's not saying anything.

"Alright, now," he eventually announces. "Finished."

Mirasal eagerly rises up from the chair, stepping over to stand by him. "It's beautiful," she says as she proudly gazes at it, resting her head on his shoulder. The expression he'd painted was neutral, demure, with a slight mischievous smile just tipping at the corners of her mouth. As if she's in on a secret no one else is privy to.

"I think it's my Mona Lisa." he grins.

"Da Vinci." Mirasal replies.

"You know about him?"

"Yes. He's well-known among our people, actually. Artists in my family, remember?" she explains. "You're as good as my ahauvo."

"Really?" Robert seems surprised at her compliment.

"Yes, he would like your work. I think he'd admire it. You two would get on well." Her grandfather and Imarito had been close, at least prior to the accident. Afterwards, Imarito's increasing hostility made interactions between the two short. Her grandfather eventually pulled away. Seeing their relationship disintegrate into just cold formalities was painful.

Robert gives a timid smile before he takes her hand, observing her a moment. "Close your eyes," he says as he touches her lids. "I have a little something I want to show you."

Mirasal shuts them, as he gently grips her by the shoulders and maneuvers her to sit on the foot of the bed.

"Keep them closed."

"I am."

Robert takes a step back from her, and a few seconds pass by. "Alright, you can look."

Smiling, Mirasal opens them and what she sees next makes her blood run cold, her heart rate increase and her smile turn into a gape-mouthed look of sheer horror.

Imarito.

Every little detail, right down to a favorite silver ring he always wore on his right index that his father had given him and his bright jade eyes, a color both her daughters had inherited, to the wavy light brown mane. Every little thing about him told her it was her dead mate standing before her. Even his scent was there.

A ghost. Only flesh.

As he reaches down to stroke her cheek, Mirasal frantically stumbles up from the bed, backing away, metal hand cupped over her mouth, her breathing ragged, stunned.

"W-what, w-what are you d-doing?" she manages.

Imarito-or rather Robert in Imarito's skin-puts his arms out and starts

towards her. "What's wrong?"

He even has his voice.

Mirasal backs away, bumping the easel and nearly tipping it over. "What is...? Why are you... just..." she whimpers and turns away, tucking her head down, both hands now coming up to cradle her face as she begins rocking. "Why are you doing this."

"What do you mean? I thought..." he tries to come closer and reach for her, but she jerks her shoulder back just as his fingertips make contact and steps away, still shielding her face in her hands.

"Stop, change back," she mutters, voice splintering. "Pacero, just change back. I can't look at you."

Robert does as ordered and shifts back to his own form. Back with a burgeoning aura of confusion. "I thought being him would make you happy, that's all. Why are you reacting this way?"

"Why would that make me happy? Why would I want you to..." Mirasal's arms glumly drop, keeping her back to him. Unsure if he's transformed back or not. "Why would you do that?"

"I-I changed back. Look at me..."

Her inflection surges into anger as she finally whirls around, palms out. "What is wrong with you?! Why would you do that?!"

Robert stares, his bottom lip trembling. "I said I was trying to make you happy. I thought by just-"

"By trying to be him? You are *not him*. Do you understand? *You're not him*." she says as she shakes her head, planting the heels of her palms to her ears, looking to the floor. "Just go. Get out. Go. Go."

Showing the first signs of irritation, Robert growls. "I just wanted to-"

"Go!" she shouts.

Teeth gritted and sharpened, Robert glares, pupils a blur of yellow and red as he stalks out the door, violently slamming it behind him.

Mirasal stands in place, pulling her bottom lip in as she sinks onto the bed, curling up into a fetal position. Feeling the tears stinging the rims of her eyes, she gazes at the courtship box that sits alongside the edge of the desk.

"I need to get out here." Imarito bumps into the dresser, the love box he'd given her a decade before hits the carpet and rolls to a stop near his feet. He heads towards their bedroom door, fumbling clumsily for the doorknob.

"Too much to drink," Mirasal says. "You need to just stay in the house-"

"I don't want to be in this crouhole anymore. No more than you do," he staggers back in her direction. "We could have lived in a nicer house, but you didn't want that."

Mirasal sidesteps the subject of his family trying to give them a more palatial home and her desire to avoid being indebted to them to avoid another argument.

As if that were possible.

"You spent the remaining coins on wine? Why?"

"Complaining about money? Guess it's the whore's daughter in you."

"Don't to speak to me that way. You have no right to do that."

They had been yelling at each other the day before. The fights were becoming more intense, his words ugly, more hateful. Previously, she knew him as a kind man. An attentive man. A sober man. Another side of him was coming out. One she'd never witnessed throughout their years together.

A side she was becoming more and more afraid of.

"I don't need you to tell me what to do, alright? No, I think I need..." he slurs as he yanks open the bottom drawer of the dresser and removes a gun.

"You're not the only one with a weapon around here." Imarito turns to around to face her.

"Put that down," Mirasal keeps her gaze fixed to the sleek black metal being aimed downwards as he adjusts the cartridge. "You're going to go out and shoot it again? Just drinking and shooting. That's not what the gun is for."

"I know. This is what it's for." Imarito replies as he lifts the gun, the barrel pointing directly at Mirasal's forehead.

She stiffens. Her breath has left her, her heartbeat rattling against her chest.

"I can't live without you and the girls. I can't." he says, lowering his aim.

"Then you need to put that down, now. Just tell me what I can do to help you."

Imarito's pupils are watery as a pained grimace forms, shaking his head. "I can't. I can't do this."

Mirasal moves forward gingerly, pausing every few seconds, trying to find a way to coax the gun out of his hand. He lowers himself down to the ground, kneeling.

"You know I still have nightmares about it. About seeing their dead bodies, just burned. Burned and charred," he whispers. "Sometimes I wake up and I'm still there, in that ship debris. And-" he turns his blurred irises up at her. "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I can see their faces, staring down at me from the ceiling."

"I know. I know about the nightmares. I have them too. You know that. We can heal together," she gradually raises a palm out to him. "Just give me that first."

Without warning he bolts up. "No! No! I can't!" he shouts, fingers are pressed to his temple. "No!"

At this moment, Mirasal makes a decision. Jumping up, she dashes for the bedroom door, with him still shouting to himself. Running down the hall to the girl's room, she swings open the door. In her panic, she rapidly searches the wall for the room's light switch in the darkness.

"Come now. Get up. We have to go."

Both Ineti and Sarez groggily look up at her, shielding their eyes from the sudden burst of brightness.

"What is it, masare?" Ineti queries as she knuckles her eyes.

"Just come on."

Still in their nightgowns, holding Sarez in her arms and guiding Ineti by the hand, she makes her way downstairs to the door. With Imarito's yelling becoming more erratic, they run towards a cluster of bushes just at the edge of the front yard. As she tucks them down, she keeps her gaze over her shoulder.

"Masare." Sarez begins to whimper.

"Shhh," Mirasal strokes the girl's head. "Just stay here a moment, I have to-"

In the house, Imarito's screaming ceases with a single gunshot.

With her attention still pinned to the small box and a cold chill throttling through her, Mirasal gradually drifts off to sleep.

It charges down the halls of the hotel, Its arms out as Its talons drag along the walls, clawing and tearing and ripping.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." It repeats through a sneer, Its drool-slathered incisors protruding from Its skull, Its claws still slicing apart the patterned wallpaper, leaving a trail of tatters.

Back in the cave, the rotting stench of carcasses is a strange comfort as It sits on the ground. Its face contorting, slipping between that of Robert, Pennywise, a bird and back to the praying mantis and spider hybrid. Mandibles clicking and spurring as It cries, a cross between weeping and shrieking.

No, this wasn't supposed to happen. She's supposed to be glad. Grateful. It just wants to make her happy. It just wants her. Wants her to want It like she did the dead man.

But she was angry. Her anger and disgust tasted foul, for some reason.

Foul and bitter. She was also questioning Its sincerity, questioning whether or not It was false.

Was she right to do this? Yes, but it hurt all the same.

It lets out a roar as It shifts back into Robert, Its eyes a hollow coal-black. Craning Its neck skyward as cracks of thunder and lightning booms outside, causing the ground to quiver, the rain now appearing, cracking furiously down along the grotto water, a flurry of powerful winds billow through the cavern.

How dare she not appreciate what It was trying to do for her. It has catered to her, healed her physical pain, influenced happy memories, sacrificed Its precious hunting time, even forgave her for interacting with the old useless fucking Turtle.

Intentionally.

And yet, this is what she does. Ejects It from her room. How dare she make It feel this. This painful combination of hurt, confusion, anger and rejection.

No. It will not surrender to these emotions.

Remember, no new things. No change. Ever. Its vow to no longer feel was broken. It was going against Its nature. Its purpose.

And all for what. This ungrateful mortal. It was sabotaging Itself all in the name of pleasing this woman.

It melts down through the mushy grounds of the cave and rises up through the top floor of the hotel, attacking a random human man coming back from a tryst with another woman. Ripping the man's chest open, It removes the heart, leaving it in the empty space in the bed he and his wife were sharing. She knew about his liaisons with other women and was emotionally crushed by it. It tearing his heart out was amusing.

It entered the room of a slumbering young couple, spiriting away their infant son and scarfing down the child back in Its lair.

It possessed one of the stone gargoyles placed around the building and chased a teenage boy sneaking around in the middle of the night. It

tormented him for an hour or two before It finally consumed him.

Throughout the night, It fed, but then Its violence became more of a release than for hunger. Or even amusement.

A few hours prior to dawn, It teleported to the bar entrance, stepping inside. Not many patrons due to the storm and the hour. It studies the small gathering of pathetic humans scattered about, trying desperately to mate with each other.

Disgusting creatures. Parasites.

And It isn't the only one who thinks so.

It spies the scar-faced Thycenian bartender, roughly cleaning a glass with a repulsed glower. He isn't happy with the tourists, the humans "contaminating" his planet. It moves to the counter, without so much as a word. The bartender gazes at It, pausing, before reaching behind the counter and presenting a large double-barreled gun.

Taking aim, he begins to fire it at the patrons, each one screaming, ducking, pushing past each other to scurry towards the exit. Bullets sporadically firing off at the crowd, striking random men and women, wounding, sometimes killing. Afterwards, It has the prostitute help him collect the carnage, piling them up in his lair. Their possessions stripped from their bodies and tossed aside in an ever-growing pile.

The bar, now vacant, is peppered with pools of blood and brain matter along the walls and floor. Melissa dutifully cleans it. Anything left, nobody will notice. It will make sure of that. The poor souls who managed to escape will have short-term memory loss in regards to what occurred here. And the bartender will go back to mixing and serving drinks to customers that he secretly despises without a hint of recollection of what he'd done.

It went back to the lair, Its hunger more than satiated and having grown bored with the violence. But the emotions were still raging, that combo of sadness and anger.

And now desperation.

It suddenly gets an idea. Sending Melissa back to the hotel, It disappears.

Mirasal lay propped up on her pillow, shoulder blades rested against the headboard. She'd slept a few hours, but the intensity of her dreams had jolted her awake. Dreams where she is standing in the middle of a darkened hallway, alone and with a pair of glowing red, pupilless eyes peering out of the darkness at her. Shapeless, featureless, but menacing. The fact that she couldn't see its form was what was so frightening. The fear it struck in her as she awoke, sweating and shaking, was palpable. Unsettling.

Where such an image had come from, or why she felt it familiar was a mystery.

And then the turtle. The turtle was there. Watching. But this time, it had strange rainbow beams of light emitting from its plastron, almost like multi-colored gems catching rays of the sunlight.

The unknown beast with the blood-red eyes seemed to fear the small animal. Running away the moment it appeared.

She stares off out the window at the storm that was experiencing an uptake in rain and winds, then seemed to die down again. As the weather became more calmer, her thoughts inevitably drift to Robert. Sleep had given her respite from the sting of remembering what he'd done, the shock of actually seeing her dead mate before her. An image she was struggling to shake.

Robert hadn't come back, and truthfully, she didn't want him to. Not yet. Not after that. Maybe he was back in his room, still in the building. Or, maybe he left. The thought made the tiniest bit of an ache bloom within her.

In the three years since Imarito's death, she'd only had one relationship, and he'd failed to touch her heart in any way.

Not like the way Robert did.

And in those three years, she felt like she'd just been drifting, just floating through life. She had her daughters to look after, her job. But not much else. She just sort of existed, almost numb at times. Robert had brought something out of her that she hadn't felt in eons it

seems; happiness. The last two years with Imarito had just about drained her emotionally, along with the stress of his death and the animosity from his family. She couldn't remember a time when she wasn't distraught, crying, or just feeling like she was dead to the world. Locked away in her own little reality, where she limited her contact to close friends and family. Opening herself up to someone new wasn't what she wanted or what she was looking for. Robert had taken her by surprise. Maybe a part of her was frightened of letting anyone near her heart ever again. Perhaps that's why she questioned his sincerity, his motives. That paranoia she always had lurking in the back of her mind, making her question everything. Maybe she was looking for ways to push him away.

What he'd done wasn't unforgivable. Just misguided. And disrespectful. But surely not malicious.

She gazes over at the rose. Its tiny sun-like center has diminished. The petals almost looking dull in color. For a split second, she swears she sees it flicker.

Almost like a hologram.

Chalking it up to sleepiness, she rests her head back down upon the pillow, pulling the blankets back over her shoulders. Her lids become heavy as the warmth of the covers and the sounds of the rain gently tapping against the windows lulls her back to sleep.

Just then, a shimmery, almost illuminated green mist seeps in through the cracks of the window pane. Taking on a shape, it swirls, spirals, twists into a humanoid form. Harold now stands within the strange fog, looming over the bed. He reaches into his pocket and removes the turtle carving. Holding it out with his right hand, he taps it with his left index, and for a split second, the figurine glows brightly. Bringing it up to his mouth, he whispers to it.

Harold then places the figurine on the nightstand and vanishes.

28. Chapter 27

Chapter 27

"My love, we can close our eyes but we cannot stop the sunrise."

— Kamand Kojouri

An ungodly pounding on her room's door at the crack of dawn jolts Mirasal from her sleep. Stumbling up from beneath the covers, still in her clothes from the previous day and silently chastising herself for once again passing out wearing her prosthetic, she opens the door and is immediately met with a flat wooden box being shoved at her, nearly knocking her backwards.

Tapia stood, wild-eyed and ranting incoherently, looking like she'd seen a ghost.

"Take them. I don't want them in my home anymore." is all she says before taking off down the hallway, still rambling Arak prayers under her breath. Mirasal watches her leave before she shuts the door.

Placing the box on the bed, she opens it; the seven gold and silver medals were all there. Still carefully aligned in the velvet insert, polished, the red and purple silk ribbons neatly folded. Picking each one up, she turns them over and reads the little inscription Imarito had written on the back of each along with their daughters' names;

'Don't lose sight of the stars. They can sometimes be overshadowed by the moons.'

What had occurred to have Tapia have such a change of heart, it didn't matter. They were back in her possession, where they belong. Staring at them a moment before she closes the lid and casts her gaze out into the burgeoning morning. The storm clouds were allowing a slice of sunlight to fight its way through. Modest, but still enough to draw her outside, to the bank of the water.

Sitting upon a large rock, she takes in the hushed serenity of the area, when she spies, perched on a smaller rock near her to her right, a

lizard. The stunning white of its scales contrasted with the black diamond pattern printed along its back and the ruby stripes outlining its mouth. Its thinly-slit golden almond pupils seemed to be watching her.

She and the tiny creature continue to regard each other, until she positions her body, facing its direction.

"I know it's you." she whispers as she reaches her metal palm out for the lizard to crawl on. Picking it up, she brings the tip of her flesh finger up to stroke the ridges of its elongated head. It closes its lids, its split tongue flicking.

"I'm not angry with you now. I just don't understand." she adds.

She carries him back up to her room, pausing before the slashed, shredded wallpaper dangling along the hall.

"You did that?" Mirasal gives the tiny beast a reproachful scowl. He proceeds to hang his head downwards in confirmation.

"Robert. You'll have to pay for that."

Once she shuts the room door, he leaps out of her hands and in a blur of black and white, slithers up into the form of Robert, his gold spheres still narrowly slit. He gives his head a quick shake, the slits now expanding into circles.

They stand in silence as he gazes down at the wooden box sitting atop the comforter.

"Tapia. She just came and practically threw them through the door." Mirasal says, still flummoxed.

"Must have changed her mind." Roberts replies, pursing his lips to conceal a smirk.

It can't reveal, but It once again assumed the form of the dead man and appeared in the home of the dead man's sister. Not looking nearly as pleasant, but displaying a bloody gunshot wound to the temple, creamy white eyes and rotting flesh hanging off a skeletal frame. It menaced the woman in her bedroom with warnings to return the stolen property or else

face the wrath of the spirit of her dead brother.

"They need a new case," Mirasal says as she opens it. "He won these, before he went into the army. He was one of the best cliff leapers."

"What's that?"

"What it sounds like, you leap between cliffs. Very high up, using a pole. I watched him do it once and I was terrified he was going to fall."

Robert stays mute, his expression distant, eyeline loosing focus. She closes the lid to the box and stares at him, an unspoken question hovering in the air between them.

"I can be anything you want me to be." he finally says, not meeting her gaze.

"I don't need that. For you to be him."

"I was trying to make you happy, that's all. I thought you wanted to see him."

"But it wasn't him. It was you. You don't have to pretend. He's gone. It's in the past. He's here-" she pats her chest over her heart. "Hidden away, the memories, the good ones are all there. It was wounded. Time has brought me healing, but it was like you took that and just ripped it away, do you understand? I've moved past it and that brought me back. Do you understand that?"

Robert keeps his attention to the pointed tips of his shoes, giving a little sniffle. "I don't know what you want."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what to do here, alright? I don't know how to, just..." he explains as he runs his fingers through his hair. "I'm not anything you want to be with."

Mirasal, raising her hands up to clutch his upper arms, gently rests her left cheek against his tense chest, feeling it rise and fall. For a moment the only sounds are his raspy breathing and the faint crash

of thunder outside. He entwines his arms around her, his chin cradled upon her head. For a moment, they stay in this position.

"I have to show you something." Robert briskly breaks the embrace and lifts his left fingers up to press them to her forehead.

Images begin sweeping across her vision; two human males, both dark-haired, one wearing spectacles, chasing something large through some vast murky area, shouting expletives. Out of either side of her vision, a pair of massive ebony arachnid-like limbs are swatting at the two men as they approach, shrieking and hissing. Another image of a path of black coarse-shelled eggs, hatching, cracking open, with tiny insectoid appendages pushing their way out. The small spider-like creatures are being chased down and stomped by another, different human male. He proceeds to smash the remaining eggs with his boot, wearing a countenance of sheer repulsion as he brings his soles down on the semi-transparent shells of each.

At that moment, as the man is crushing the life from these beings, she feels a puncture of agony pierce through her heart. An overwhelming sense of immense sorrow coupled with a sharp, blistering pain scalding her insides.

And a sense of potent fear.

As Robert removes his fingertips, she lets out a gasp, as if seeking air from this torrent of emotions and sensations seeming to suffocate her. She shakily catches her composure, with Robert still holding her. With a few wobbly steps, she lowers herself to the foot of the bed, chest heaving.

There's a drawn-out silence as she stares downwards, hands now coming up to hold the top of her skull. She gradually brings her dazed visage up to look at him. Her azure disks blurred by tears.

"What..." she queries, her intonation almost a croak. She need not say more.

Robert's morose expression wanders the room, before settling back down on her.

"That was them." he says.

Mirasal's fingers come up to touch her mouth, still blinking back the teardrops. She languidly rises up and once again, embraces him, burying her face against the crisp white collar of his shirt.

There's another extended quiet, before she cups his cheeks.

"And that was you." she says in a solemn whisper.

The real him. The volatile beast she'd only glimpsed. Touching his chin and directing his head to either side, surveying the map of features she'd grown accustomed to. Features that he insisted before were his true appearance. The rush of sadness and sympathy extinguishes the smoldering embers of anger that had been simmering deep within.

It had been a lie.

But perhaps an understandable one

He peers down at her, his demeanor doleful, withered. "Does it change your view of me?"

She tucks her head down, forehead propped against his right breast, arms snaking around his ribs. The sight of the tiny creatures running for their lives dashes across her mind, causing her to hug him tighter.

"No."

"Hey there, chubs. I'm not against a man with more than a little meat on his bones." On the second floor, near the top of the main stairwell, Melissa approaches Gabriel, her bony fingers coming up to stroke along his stomach. Gabriel smacks them away.

"No thanks." he sneers.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't fuck whores. Especially emaciated-looking ones."

Melissa's expression turns dark as she steps back. "That's not very nice. C'mon. Try it, you might like it." she purrs as she reaches for his crotch. Gabriel snaps her by the wrist and shoves it away.

"I said *fuck off*."

Melissa glowers at him, yanking her wrist away, her lips squeezing into a thin line as she turns and huffs off, pulling at the hem of her black mini skirt as she makes her leave down the stairs, flipping him the bird on her descent down.

Gabriel narrows his lids at her, waiting for her to disappear amid the blanket of people and bots before he makes his way downstairs where Kikara was seeing to the preparations for the convention. The colorful array of inventors were already ambling about the lobby and dining room, their artificial companions following at their heels. The styles of the robotic designs differed; some were four-legged and insect-like in their appearance, others are bipedal. There were some that rolled along on wheels while others were so small they rode on the shoulder of their creators.

Some of the roboticists were human, others Podmalo, Neeyotyto and Ithaga. There was only one Aniterran. Not surprising; very few actually could be found on Tarros due to the hostilities between them and Thycenians. The fact that one was gallant enough to brave a possible conflict by showing was admirable. His own creation looked similar to his people, a large dragonfly-like droid that could hover in the air.

Teora had made a point to stay hidden in the kitchen, helping out with various chores such as preparing breakfast and washing dishes and utensils. Although the heat from the stove and the steam was making the room like a sauna, it was better than being out there.

Being vulnerable.

"My offer still stands. You can go on home and I'll do your shift." Radaha says, placing a stack of plates in the cupboard.

"No. I think I will be alright. I just want to get it over with," Teora insists as she moves to peer out the kitchen door, a tinge of

apprehension shuddering through her as she sees the crowd of droids, each of varying shapes and sizes meandering about, mingling with the tourists who didn't hide their delight at the display. "There's so many of them though. Is she even here anymore? Have you seen her?"

"Chiama O'Maille? No. I think she's still up in her room with Richie." Tomah replies as he prepares a serving tray of unidentified appetizers that looked like eggs. The course was most likely Radaha's attempt at being diverse in her cooking.

Teora continues to inspect the dining hall. No, no Ellowyn or her creation in sight. Her absence almost felt disconcerting in a way. Teora wanted to know where the woman was at all times. She'd been avoiding her, and hoped to continue to do so. Then when the convention was over, Ellowyn will leave and she won't have to deal with her.

Strange that she was nowhere in sight, as she and Richie are to be the highlight of the show, according to one of the organizers.

As afternoon rolls around, there's a few booths and stands now erected in the lobby and even more tourists than usual piling in through the front doors. Seems many weren't too interested in the Kalendo Sky Festival parade that was occurring down in Galivo.

Mirasal makes her way around, carrying a tray of drinks, trying her best to appear in good spirits, offering half-hearted smiles and greeting to the guests. Occasionally zoning out as she still had those disturbing images infesting her thoughts. More than a few of the attendees had inquired whether she was well or not.

Tomah had come to the room, asking her for help as they were swamped and she'd left Robert alone, with him saying he'd be down shortly.

Finding a discreet little nook under the main stairs, she sits, the now-empty tray balanced upon her thighs, watching as everyone engages in lively conversations and drinking.

She still had questions. Troubling things left unanswered. They would

have to wait.

It sat upon the bed as more emotions plagued It. However, It has grown accustomed to this. It no longer felt the need to fight off these feelings. They were not entirely welcome, but at this point unavoidable. Its need to abide by the laws of a physical form has made It susceptible to these new emotions.

Tonight, It would tell her. Tell her that in a year's time It will have Its long rest. A rest to span twenty-seven years. During which she will no doubt meet another. Somebody to make her happy. At this, It seethes. The idea of another one touching her, kissing her, giving her comfort. It sickened It.

But it is beyond Its control.

And there was another matter. One only brought to Its attention last night.

Just then, outside, Its mind sees the prostitute, holding the hand of a diminutive blonde-haired girl decked out in a lavender sweater and pink pants. Melissa is pulling the child towards the cave.

Growling, It melts into the mattress, popping up through the muddy bottom of the cave.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? In broad daylight?!" Robert storms up to Melissa, the little girl now whimpering as she attempts to pry the woman's fingers from hers.

"Hey, she was there. Her parents weren't looking. I convinced her to come with me. No one saw." she casts her gaze down to the child, whose still struggling to free herself. "Isn't that right Julie? And the boy was taken in daylight."

"There wasn't so many around then!" Robert counters.

"I want my mommy and daddy." Julie's whimpering is now becoming quivering wails, her cheeks pinkening, snot starting to dribble from her nostrils.

"Come on, little one. Don't be afraid," Robert grunts and grimaces and switches into his favorite avatar, his left eye doing an odd roll before

settling on the terrified little girl. "Here, you want a balloon animal?"

From behind his back, Pennywise presents an elongated pink balloon, which he quickly molds into a giraffe.

"Here!" he squeals, holding it out, his inflection now the high-pitched child-like tone he adopts with children. "You like giraffes, Julie. I know you do. And your favorite color is pink!"

Julie does not cease her cries at the gift. Her pale face now a beet-red as she continues her shrieking, her screams reverberating through the caverns. Enraged, Pennywise lets out a frustrated roar as he raises his gloved left hand, his talons ripping through the porcelain-white material, tearing through the girl's jugular. Her cries are cut-off as she drops limply to the ground.

"Pick her up." Pennywise orders as Melissa gathers the girl's tiny corpse in her arms. They walk further in, coming into view of the possessions that have mounted up near the suspended column of bodies.

"I told you to take care of the fat man." Pennywise growls as Melissa dumps the child's body to her feet, stepping over her to come vis-à-vis with the clown.

"He didn't bite, okay? He wasn't falling for it."

Pennywise kneels down, cupping Julie's plump cheek, the tear tracks along her skin now flecked with blood speckles. "You should of waited. Now you've-"

Click.

Pennywise gradually stands, the crimson lines of his face distorting as a devious smirk forms as he slowly looks at the third party that has unexpectedly decided to join them.

Gabriel stood, a silver handgun cocked, his steely gaze pointedly on the strange familiar clown.

"Saw her dragging that kid out here," Gabriel begins as he comes closer. "You know, I didn't think so at first. I thought Kikara was just

being paranoid. But, no. It was fucking you the whole time," he takes a step back before continuing, his gun still aimed at Pennywise. "It's you under that bozo make-up. And it was you before. The eyes. I *knew* I'd seen those eyes before. And that other shit I saw. All the same eyes. It didn't come to me immediately, but then I remembered," he aims at his temple with the tip of the gun barrel. "You. Then I saw you and the whore here," he gestures to Melissa. "Leaving the cave yesterday. And who is the old guy? You all in this together?"

Gabriel gingerly comes closer, pausing and staring at Julie's lifeless body, her lavender sweater saturated a deep red. "Fuck, you know, I don't care what you do to the other assholes here, but Kikara..." he stops as he scans his surroundings.

"What in the actual fuck." he mutters as he takes in the levitating graveyard, some without limbs, their expressions almost peaceful, calm.

"What is this shit?" Gabriel turns his glare back to the clown and his accomplice. As he steps forward, he kicks aside a small jewelry box sitting a few feet from the junk pile.

Gabriel had wanted to tell Kikara what he'd seen last night, but she was so tired, and he didn't want to scare her anymore than she already was.

No, he was going to handle this on his own.

Pennywise chuckles, his irises sparking a rich amber. "What do you think you're going to do with that? You've never used it. Never even fired a gun before. It's not like you can just leave a window open-" Pennywise's features twist into those of Alfredo, his voice now altered to that of the old man. Only his clown costume remained intact. "And give me my death of cold!" he cackles.

Gabriel's eyes widen as his knees give out, stumbling backwards, the arm that held the gun now trembling visibly as he struggled to keep his target.

"Jesus Christ..." he gasps.

Alfredo's wrinkled, ancient face melts away into that of El Sombrerón, a round black hat bursting out the sides of his skull.

"Remember me Gabby?" the monster chortles, his thumbs planted in his ears as his fingers wiggle wildly. He does a sneaking motion towards Gabriel, whose still fighting to keep his gun on the approaching threat, a gust of chilly wind pushing him back.

With a spinning motion, the creature's ghoulish grin transforms into that of La Llorona, her long locks flowing out, jaw unhinging as she lets loose an eardrum-shattering shriek, strident enough to crack the lens of a pair of child's reading glasses laying atop the junk heap and forcing Melissa to cup her ears in agony.

The force knocks Gabriel to the ground, the gun toppling from his grasp. The ghostly woman stands over him, the ruffles of the clown suit twitching as her delicate pale features morph into those of Robert Gray, the off-white clown costume shrinking back to reveal a black suit underneath. His golden-yellow pupils burning hot.

"What the Hell are you." Gabriel's inquiry is but a whisper as he stares up as his attacker, his voice weakened by the terror now paralyzing him.

Robert kneels down, the gold of his irises now etched in red as his face hovers near Gabriel's, inhaling the man's puissant fear.

"I'm your worst nightmare, fat boy. And when you're down here with me, you'll float too."

Gabriel keeps his gaze glued with Robert's as he finds the strength to snatch up his weapon. With rapidity, he fires it off, the bullet bursting through Robert's right eye. The impact only causes his head to weave slightly as he stands, a demented grin spreading as blood begins to trickle upwards from the wound, blackened and smoking.

Robert begins to chuckle, inaudibly at first, then increasing in volume, becoming more maniacal as Gabriel scrambles up, still pointing the gun at his assailant. He watches with shock and horror as the silver shell of the bullet starts to gradually push its way out of Robert's disfigured skull, with him still laughing like a madman.

The regurgitated metal capsule hits the soggy ground as Robert looks between it and Gabriel, his laughter quieting down.

"Did you really think that would work? You're just a man," Robert taunts as he stalks towards Gabriel again. "I mean, it's not like it isn't painful. It sure as fuck is, but not deadly, not for me. It would take far more than what you're capable of to take me down. But you know what's funny," Robert halts, now adopting a more contemplative, nearly puzzled look. "A bunch of kids were able to take me down, can you believe that? They had unity though. It's why they were able to do it. Bonding together helped *almost* destroy me. Almost."

He is now right in Gabriel's face, pushing his chest against the barrel of his weapon. "My preference for children's fear was a double-edged sword it seems. They were able to turn around and bite back. Use the very thing I preyed on against me-*imagination*. It's what makes their fear so potent, so vivid, so delectable."

Gabriel drops his gun as the metal begins to burn his flesh, sizzling a vibrant orange. "Ow, shit!" He seizes his palm over the burn mark, stare never faltering from this, whatever he is.

"I am the Eater of Worlds. I feed on children." Robert smirks, reading the man's thoughts.

"Jesus fuck, does she know? She doesn't does she? You may have fooled that retard but-"

Snarling, Robert snatches Gabriel by the throat, squeezing as the man wheezes and coughs, burrowing his claws into his skin.

"Time to float." Robert growls as his mouth starts to expand upwards, rows and rows of stained shark-like incisors protruding out, drenched with saliva strings. In the back of his throat are three tiny balls of orange lights, hovering in a hypnotic circular motion. Voices begin streaming out as the lights grow brighter, screaming, hollering, crying for help. Endless men, women and children.

The dark brown of Gabriel's pupils are blotted out by milky white as Robert gradually lets loose his grasp, allowing Gabriel to glide away from his fingers. Robert gives him a gentle nudge, sending him

sailing towards the vortex of bodies. Gabriel takes his place among the others, drifting along the invisible path.

Robert turns to Melissa. "Get out of here. Go. Now before I change my mind."

Melissa, who'd covered her eyes to shield herself from the horror of Robert's Deadlights, runs towards the distant light of the cave's exit, glancing back at him.

"I'll have some more ready for you." she yells.

Robert ignores her, roaming about his lair, fingering his wound, blood still spurting, gathering in swirling billows mid-air.

It cannot face her like this. If she sees this, she will be frightened. No, It must slumber. For only a week's time, maybe a little more. Enough to heal. Then It will come find her.

But It would still have to explain Its absence. Explain where It was. As well as Its revelations to her. She'd not seen It. Not the true form. She can never see It.

It loathes to admit it, but perhaps that lazy useless Turtle is right. It has shown her too much.

Letting out a howl of frustration, It sinks into the ground to slumber, farther down into the cave chambers.

Its dreams will no doubt be consumed with irritation and discontent.

29. Chapter 28

Chapter 28

"He's the only stable thing in the swirling chaos."

— Beth Revis, *A Million Suns*

"Gabriel is missing," Kikara appears behind Mirasal, dabbing her tears with the pads of her fingertips. "He said he'd be right back and it's been all day," she pauses, sniffing before continuing. "I don't know who else to go to. It's just I'm scared."

"He probably went home to Susana-" Mirasal stumbles, almost dropping the empty metal tray she was holding as Kikara suddenly wraps her arms around her.

"No. He would have said. He would have. He wouldn't have left without telling me. There's something wrong," Kikara replies, gazing off, shaking her head. "I didn't mean to act...I mean I-" she squeezes her tightly, almost crushing her. "I don't know what to do. I don't know who to talk to."

"You don't need to do anything, it's fine," Mirasal sighs, taking this almost-apology for what it was, squirming, but ultimately yielding to the embrace. "I'm sure he's around. Don't worry."

Kikara straightens, giving one last sniffle before she wonders off. "I'm going to the kitchen. More drinks are needed." she says as she nervously surveys the crowd, scuttering through the sea of rowdy guests.

As evening approaches, the lights in the hotel are coming on, illuminating the lobby. Mirasal looks up the main stairwell, eclipsed by all the people meandering about, trying to see if Robert was going to surface. Perhaps he's tied up with a client. He mentioned there could be potential business deals around. She was anxious for this convention to end-and it looked like it was going to be a while longer- as their discussion before was abruptly interrupted by Tomah.

She leaves the tray on a nearby stand and heads to the room, squeezing her way in between the patrons, passing by Tomah having a debate with the Aniterran inventor.

"You invaded our planet first." the man says as Tomah shakes his head at him. His response is muffled as she gets farther away from their impromptu parley.

Upon entering her room, however, there's nothing but an empty bed and no sign that he was anywhere.

"Robert?" Mirasal stands, glancing around when she catches something on the nightstand, obscured by the lamp and barely visible.

"What?" she whispers as she moves to take a closer look; the turtle trinket. Undoubtedly the one she'd made. She takes another cursory scan of the room.

No Harold either. Perhaps that is where Robert is; off with his brother.

Hope warms over her as she touches the turtle. The room suddenly becomes shrouded in darkness with but a single large beam of light flooding down upon a circle of eleven human males, all varying ages, all wearing coal-black uniforms with large gold buttons along the breast. Each one with a distant mien and an aura of somberness, murmuring among themselves. Their eyes are a pupilless smooth marigold as they stare down at one laying in the center.

The man's features are obscured by the other men's legs, only hints of a tuft of silver hair visible amid their boots.

A younger one, merely a boy, comes forward, gazing down at the deceased. "Our mighty brother, once strong and beautiful, who arose from the Prim with us is dead. Poisoned and weakened and now dead." The boy kneels down to place two large rose petals upon the man's eyes. All eleven drop their chins and start to say a prayer in an indiscernible language.

With her breathing heavy, Mirasal slowly, charily, begins to approach

the group of strangers, none of whom seem to take notice of her presence. Before she can get a glimpse of the dead man's face, the young boy appears to direct a question at her.

"Why? Why would the chard-dah have done this?" he queries, looking directly at her.

And with that she was back in the room, the odd scene having dissipated.

She stays in place, taking in deep shivering breaths, clutching the carving to her chest. That same feeling from before compels her to place it in her pocket.

A sudden gentle knock makes her jump.

Teora stood in the doorway. "I don't know what to do about Kikara. She's crying about Gabriel. She thinks something happened. It's getting a little uncomfortable."

"Alright. I'm coming."

As they walk down the hall, Teora halts, "Facala," she mutters, teeth gritted. "She's in our way. She wasn't there when I came up. Where has she been hiding? She comes out now?"

Ellowyn stood at the top of the stairs, looking out over the scene, her back to the two women. Richie was dutifully at her side, the electricity within his clear head scintillating brilliant blue.

"We can just go past her. I don't think she'll-" Mirasal begins before being cut off by the pressure of Teora's fingers taking hold of her right forearm.

"Ow..."

"No, I don't want to go near her," she urges. That same nagging sense of dread was trembling through her veins. She tightens her grip on Mirasal's arm. "Let's just wait here a moment."

Mirasal blows a sigh through her lips, trying to loosen Teora's grasp. "Fine."

Below the balcony, a tourist is standing before a tall bulky humanoid droid, reaching up to touch its blank, flat metallic face. "Fuckin' cool man!" he exclaims, grinning at his reflection in the glossy metal.

"You are an asshole." the bot says, backing away, swatting at the man's hand.

The man frowns at its human creator. "Hey, your machine just called me an asshole. Didn't you program it to have some manners?"

"Machines are to be treated with respect," Ellowyn declares as she remains firmly at the top of the main stairwell, like a Queen holding court. "They think. They feel. They are self-aware. They can be affronted. The only one in need of manners is you, dear sir."

She sends an icy glare down to the man. "One day," she continues. "You will all be a footnote to their greatness."

This draws chortles of derision from the people, tourists and roboticists alike, as well as a mumbled "This bitch is crazy." from one spectator.

"Now," Ellowyn raises her hands, twirling her index fingers. "Let's get this party *really* going, shall we?"

Just as quick as the words were spoken, the bulky droid proceeds to grab the obnoxious man by his throat and cleanly snap his neck, his wife shrieking and crying as he drops to the ground with a pronounced thud. Collective gasps are heard across the room as each droid, small and large begins to attack; their own makers, the guests, all swarming and attempting to evade the onslaught of violence. Screaming and crying, with some trying to shield their children.

"What is happening down there?" Teora, panicked, keeps a tight grasp on Mirasal as Ellowyn turns on her heel to face them. Richie's dome head rotates, the blue lights within once again taking on a bright red. His body soon follows, spinning to face Teora and Mirasal as Ellowyn points.

"Aw, there you are," she grins, her eyes now sparking yellow. "Richie wants to play again, darling."

Mirasal steps in front of Teora as Richie comes at them, her metal fist coming up to smash his glass dome as he jumps at them. With Teora screaming as Richie hits the ground, Mirasal grabs her by the arm, glaring at Ellowyn.

"Come on! My room now!"

They run, with Richie still behind, leaping past frantic guests, crawling along the ceiling towards them like a spider. Teora halts in shock to gawk at him scurrying along the interior.

"He didn't do that before!" she exclaims as she starts running again.

Mirasal's room comes into view as she stops to usher Teora inside.

"Get in! Now!" she yells. The sounds of the continued attack downstairs are thunderous as Teora dashes inside. Mirasal throws open the desk drawer containing her gun, along with a box of extra bullets.

At that moment Richie is at the door, viciously pounding on it. Teora begins to scream again.

"I need you to stay calm alright?" Still holding her gun, Mirasal moves to cup Teora's cheek, trying to fight back her own tremors.

As well as her own fear.

"He's going to kill us!" Teora wails. "They all are! I knew this would happen! I didn't trust that old bruga! Is she doing all this?!"

"No," Mirasal offers firmly as the pummeling on the door continues. "He won't. And I don't know." She moves to wrap an arm around Teora's quivering shoulders as the pounding only intensifies. Mirasal stares at the door, flinching with each strike to the wood.

"Get the girls out of here. Now." Nehautor orders as Arnamina begins to gather up her three daughters, balancing Aradea on her hip. The pounding on the front door causes the walls of the modest home to vibrate. A single candle atop the fireplace begins to slide towards the edge.

"Nehautor! I know you're in there! You can't hide from this any longer!"

comes a gruff, hateful voice.

"What's he here for? What does he want?" Arnamina asks, before she maneuvers the children towards the basement.

"Just, now. Get in there now and lock it." comes Nehautor's impatient response as he shuts the double doors.

"Think we can go out the window?" Teora inquires, moving to open one of them. Mirasal stops her.

"No. Too dangerous."

"More dangerous than here?" Teora argues.

Smash!

Richie manages to bust through the top half of the door, his slender fingers scrambling to locate the doorknob. Mirasal moves to punch his arm back, with Teora close behind, swatting at him before he catches a clump of her mane in his hand.

"Ah! Ow!" Teora yells as he attempts to yank her through the growing gaping hole in the door.

Aiming carefully, Mirasal points her gun and fires, shattering half of his dome head. He releases Teora and staggers back, his electric current inside flashing and briefly dying out before he lunges again. He breaks down the door, sending Mirasal and Teora flying backwards, the gun tumbling from her grasp.

Mirsal kicks Richie back with both legs as he pounces on her, the turtle carving falling from her pocket. At that, Richie's burning red light switches back to blue, the beady button eyes fixing on the trinket, backing away.

Mirsal snaps up her gun and fires another round as the bot exits, running back out. Catching her breath, her gaze switches between the destroyed door and the turtle laying on its side among the wood splinters.

She grabs the carving back up and returns it to her pocket.

In the kitchen, chaos is erupting as Kikara races to push whatever she can in front of the door. Everything from shelves taken from the wall to a small wooden stand and two stools. The door's small window now cracked as a drone had attempted to bust through, throwing itself at the glass like a deranged bird.

Radaha arms herself with a frying pan. "That's not going to keep those things out." she says as she watches Kikara shove the items in front of the entrance in vain.

"Tomah is still out there, though. Miri and Tee." Kikara whimpers.

"He's ex-military, he'll know what to do," Radaha replies, holding up the large heavy metal pan. "He and Mirasal both. We need to worry about ourselves."

Just then a loud unidentified crash happens outside the door, shaking the building. Screams of pain and terror are rumbling throughout the hotel. Loud footsteps overhead as people continue to run for their lives.

"What is this? Why are they doing this?" Radaha ponders aloud, mystified.

"Gabriel..." Kikara whispers as she removes a hammer and a large butcher knife from the drawer.

"Shut up! Let it go! He's probably dead," Radaha sneers, shaking the pan at her. "He's gone. Let it go and focus on you. On us surviving this. Whatever got him, it's over with."

"Don't say that!" Kikara hollers back.

"Look," Radaha moves to get in Kikara's face, taking her by the chin. "My people believe in self-preservation. Accept and move on. Worry about your own survival. If he is dead, you have to accept that now. We won't survive if you can't let go."

Crash!

Another mysterious sound reverberates throughout the walls around

them.

Mirasal guides Teora through the halls, passing by corpses of both human and non-human, with visible bloody wounds. Her heart skips a beat as she sees an auburn-haired man laying on his back, the tension draining as she comes into view of his face.

Not Robert.

Teora almost trips over a young human man slumped against the wall, a small drone sticking out his mouth, tiny sparks shooting from its exposed inner circuits.

"Where is she, where is Ellowyn?" Teora says as she casts a horrified look around at the carnage. "We find her, she's doing this. I know it."

"Seems she is controlling them somehow. All of them. But how?" Mirasal replies, carefully keeping watch as they round a corner. All the robots seemed to have went back down to the first floor after taking out the upstairs guests.

However she was doing it, Teora's suggestion was not wrong. Finding this woman was the key to ending this madness.

And finding Robert, Harold and the others.

"And, what was Richie so afraid of? He ran out of the room pretty quickly." Teora does a little jog to catch up to Mirasal's rapid pace.

"I think it was..." Mirasal begins, running her fingers over the dark blue material of her pant's pocket, feeling the outline of the trinket.

Just then they come across Tomah, his left eye bruised, sitting beside the Aniterra inventor's lifeless body, blood coursing from the man's mouth.

"He's gone," Tomah somberly says. "I tried, there were too many of them. Had to hide in the hall closet. I'm fortunate they didn't find me. Would have been two bodies," he brushes his fingers over the Aniterra's large oval eyes, closing his lids.

The clear sounds of heavy footsteps are fast approaching as Tomah jumps up.

"In that empty room." Mirasal points as they sneak inside and quietly close the door. Tomah makes a beeline for the window, seeing a string of guests making their escape, pursued by the killer droids.

"More out there." he says as Mirasal moves beside him, peering down.

"They're out there," Naseret says as she stands perched on a faded wooden crate, peeking out the narrow window of the basement. "They're arguing."

Mirasal runs over to join her, gazing out at Nehautor and another man she didn't recognize, dark, with writhing tentacles along his jaw. No doubt a Podmalo.

"Get away from there you two. Now," Arnamina demands. "There could be more of them out there."

Mirasal flinches as Tomah touches her shoulder. "I think we should get down there, see if Kikara and Radaha are alright." Tomah says, looking dejected.

"We may be too late." Mirasal says glumly, a heaviness enveloping her as nausea grips the pit of her stomach. She glances to the doorway.

"Let's go. I think they're all downstairs." she offers. No guarantee, since there is some slight movements in the adjoining rooms. But it could be guests who have shut themselves inside.

"You have a spare gun?" Tomah queries.

"No," Mirasal replies. "Just the one."

Outside the room, Mirasal almost bumps into a mother and her son emerging, having barricaded themselves in their room's closet. The boy attempts to run forward, his mother hooking him by his sweater collar.

"No! stay back!" she chides, meeting Mirasal's gaze.

"I said get away from there!" Arnamina commands again as she tries to keep Aradea in her arms while gesturing for the twins to refrain from spying.

"They're fighting though." Naseret argues, still staring out into the murkiness, Nehautor's glowing cybernetic eye highlighting the two men in a turquoise hue as a verbal argument starts to get physical.

"Fasare!" Mirasal yells as she leaps down from the crate and runs towards the basement exit.

"Mirasal! No! What are you doing?! Come back!" Arnamina shouts as she reaches for her daughter, stumbling along the way.

Mirasal races up the steps and pushes open the doors.

Mirasal gestures for mother and son to go back in. "Stay there, too dangerous."

As they hesitantly make their way to the balcony, they spot Ellowyn, her appearance more paler, gaunt. Her eyes now pitch black. Her newly-acquired servants hoarding around her, seemingly admiring the carnage they've created strewn along the room; heads torn from their bodies, arms and legs scattered around and blood splatters painted along the walls.

Richie, hanging from the chandelier above the lobby, swings and jumps down, landing in front of Mirasal, Teora and Tomah. Mirasal quickly reaches for the turtle, holding it out as Richie recoils back, his normal 'beep' sounding more deeper and far more threatening. His half-blown off dome shooting red sparks.

"You don't like that, do you?" Mirasal smirks as she keeps the carving held out towards him, pointing her gun simultaneously as Richie circles them, seemingly trying to find a way to attack without touching the trinket.

She could fire, but there were so many bullets remaining and in the time it took her to reload, this thing will have torn her and the others to shreds.

As the face off continues, a ruckus begins below the stairwell as

Kikara and Radaha come running out of the kitchen, brandishing their kitchen appliances-turned-weapons, Radaha striking a small drone that comes speeding towards her. Kikara striking another diminutive droid attempting to attack her.

"Get away!" she screams as she smashes its metallic skull with a deft swing of her hammer, hurtling it backwards.

Then, Harold waltzes through the lobby doors that open on their own, allowing him to glide in, a figure of perfect calm amid the feverish chaotic scene. His necklace is shining, casting a blindingly white glow as he saunters to the center of the lobby.

Just as Richie lingers back, Mirasal fires, blowing the rest of the cracked glass noggin away as he falters, landing in front of Teora. Grabbing a cane off the body of a nearby older dead male, she begins to strike Richie's metal torso, the life gradually draining out of him as his inner light fizzles out like a candle flame in a breeze.

"I hate you! I hate you!" Teora shouts as Tomah and Mirasal attempt to hold her back, linking their arms around her shoulders to subdue her fury.

"Calm down." Mirasal says, trying to remove the cane from Teora's fingers.

Mirasal runs towards the edge of the cliff where Nehautor was being cornered by the Podmalo, his tentacles still writhing in agitation. Grabbing a large stick, she runs at the man, striking him along his forearm and lower back.

"Get away from him! Get away!" she yells as she swats at his slick black skin, crimson red tattoos visible atop his round head, even in the minimal light of the moons.

"Mirasal, no! Get back inside!" Nehautor growls. "Go! Now!"

Shar'imo, puzzled, looks down at his small assailant, glancing between her and Nehautor before he lets out a bemused laugh.

"What is this? Calm down little one." he chuckles as he violently grabs her by the back of her dress, removing a knife from his belt and pointing it at

her throat.

"No! Let her go!" Nehautor snarls as he comes forward. Shar'imo tightens his grip on her as she struggles to break free.

"Stay back, I will." Shar'imo says smirking, dragging Mirasal to the edge of the cliff.

Arnamina bursts out the front door of the house, Aradea now in Naseret's arms, following close behind. Inside, the single candle has dropped from the mantle into a woven basket, its modest flame beginning to ignite the wood splints.

Outside, Arnamina is screaming as Shar'imo lifts Mirasal from the ground, her small feet now being dangled over the cliff, above the crashing waves and sharp rocks below.

"No, stop!" Arnamina's screams are half-wails as she falls to her knees.

Nehautor raises his hands. "Put her down Shar'imo. You don't involve the family, remember? That's the code we've always used-all of us. No matter which fleet." he keeps his steely gaze on Mirasal, squirming, with terror spreading across her visage as she kicks her legs.

"You know I don't follow any code, Nehautor."

"Just don't do this. I don't have your money. It was between you and Cyate."

"He's dead. Now you owe his debt. If I have to take it in the form of your family's lives, I will," Shar'imo grins derisively. "She's not even your kid." he chortles as he holds her out further. Mirasal suddenly halts her fidgeting to grab one of his tentacles and chomps down on it.

"Ahhh! You little!" Shar'imo sends her hurtling towards a nearby boulder, her small body striking it. Her mother running towards her and the fire now engulfing her home fading out.

"Oh no." Tomah nudges Mirasal, his widened eyes are on Ellowyn, who lets out an otherworldly shriek at the sight of her fallen robot. Her limbs grotesquely start to expand from her body, stretching, twisting, curling around the banister as she leaps up over the

balcony, her eyes now two large yellow orbs pinned to the three. Her small army of bots follow suite.

Heart pounding, Mirasal aims her gun at Ellowyn, her other hand still holding the turtle. Ellowyn comes to a skidding halt in its sights. The small carving's eyes are now glowing like two stars.

"Skoldpadda." Ellowyn hisses, her voice rancid.

Harold removes his necklace and raises it above his head, its streams of white light shooting out, touching the crystal of the chandelier above, making it sparkle like brilliant diamonds.

"By the power of the White!" he shouts as the droids, having paused along the steps, turn towards the older man. Ellowyn blinks down at Harold as he continues.

"By the power of the White! I order you!"

The robots switch course and come for him, crawling over each other, pushing each other aside, flying down towards him with Ellowyn leading the charge.

"Harold." Mirasal whispers as she points her gun directly back on Ellowyn as she moves.

"What are they doing?" Radaha queries as she and Kikara keep their weapons raised, relieved that the bots have now started to withdraw away from them. She and Kikara back away as the glow from Harold's talisman brightens as the robots circle around him in a pack, their hands reaching for the necklace, as if entranced by it. They swarm around him like a pack of lions sizing up their prey.

"I order you by power of the White!"

With that a flare of light emits from the stone of its center, like a camera flash, and each droid drops to the ground, the drones falling from the air. Their bodies splaying over each other in a pile of clinking metal.

Ellowyn's yellow orbs are now a snowy white as she screams, her elongated limbs flailing. Mirasal fires at her, blowing off Ellowyn's

head, her body tumbling onto her army. Limp and lifeless.

Harold lowers his arms, gazing down at the carnage of both artificial and human. Mirasal runs down the staircase. Coming to a stop in front of him as he places the talisman back around his neck.

"Robert?" she blurts out.

"He is fine. I assure you."

Relief washes over her as she smiles. "'Weapon," she says as she nods at his neck. "That's what you meant," she holds up the turtle trinket. "And this."

"A good luck charm, for protection," Harold says as he clears his throat, a stern look now developing. "I must apologize for what I must do now."

"What-"

With that, he lifts the necklace and another burst of sheer white light floods the room.

30. Chapter 29

Chapter 29

"That we are capable only of being what we are remains our unforgivable sin."

— Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator*

It awoke. Not particularly rested. Its mind had drifted. Drifted back to the Todash, leaving Its material presence hidden beneath the ground, safely stashed away in a dark crevice of the cave. As Its conscious was violently ripped back into Its avatar of Robert Gray, It could feel the wound. No healing. Something had awakened It.

Not healed. Not healed but awake prematurely.

Confused, It staggers up, focusing Its one eye, seeing only black. Hearing creaking sounds and door slamming. Unable to see a few feet in front of It with just a subtle hint of weak light from an unknown source. It begins to walk and as It does, It hears, at the edge of the darkness, children singing:

'Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement's, you owe me five farthings, say the bells of St. Martin's.'

It pauses in Its steps as It sees a flash of yellow accompanied by giggling.

A boy.

The voice of the child causes unease as another blur of yellow dashes past, before the child appears before It, partially obscured by the shadows save for emerald rain boots stark against the midnight and a speck of light in each iris.

What the Hell is this?

Little Georgie Denbrough in his slick rain coat, skin flaps dangling from his bloody stump as he slowly reveals himself as a gentle sound of thunder and rain drift out from behind him.

The boy approaches, neutral expression, standing before It.

"Why did you kill me?" Georgie asks, his round face pale, his eyes rimmed with dark circles as he gazes up. "I didn't do anything. I just wanted my boat."

Georgie holds out his hand, the paper boat sitting on his tiny fingers, blood starting to seep through and engulf the faded paper.

"It wasn't anything *personal* kid, I was *hungry*." Robert growls, lip curling up in disgust and taking a step back from this unwelcome mirage.

Like It needs to justify Itself to this brat. He is what led to Its confrontation with the hated ones. Perhaps had It targeted another child...

But maybe that would have lead to an entirely different group of children targeting It.

Maybe the Final Other intended it that way.

And that boat. That fucking boat is what started the whole mess.

It doesn't pursue this train of thought further, as it enrages It.

There's a shift in Georgie's melancholy demeanor and a creepy grin breaks out as he bends down to place his boat on a thin river of blood that has manifested, suspended a few feet above the ground.

Georgie then steps back, his form breaking apart as it evaporates upwards into the darkness as the now crimson-soaked boat starts to glide along as the singing starts up again;

'When will you pay me? Say the bells at Old Bailey. When I grow rich, say the bells at Shoreditch.'

Robert stares down at the boat as it starts to move, the blood river carrying it along. The boat's route becomes altered as the river begins to flow out, a small wave lifting it through the air. Robert's gaze follows as a red-haired woman appears amid the swirling ruby.

Beverly Marsh.

"Well, aren't you a sight," she smirks, hands perched upon her hips.

"Just as bad as the time I stabbed you in the head. Couldn't sleep that one off, huh?"

The little bitch.

Snarling, quill teeth now jetting out his mouth, Robert lunges, only to have her vaporize as he goes to tear at her throat. Her disembodied laugh echoing around him. The blood river drifts off, taking the small boat along as it disappears into the gloom as a cream-colored wooden door appears. It steadily swings open, revealing a bathroom. Robert refrains from coming closer, but the room appears to envelope him, moving on its own.

The steam cloud blanketing the area barely conceals a dark-haired man slouched in a bathtub.

Stanley Uris, head lolling against his shoulder.

Spotting Robert, he sits up as he holds out his wrists, thin slashes appearing and dripping, inking the bath water red and dotting the white porcelain.

"I got to grow up at least." he says.

Robert gives a contemptuous scoff. "You did that to *yourself*."

"After you came to me." Stan retorts, lowering his arms slowly, staring blankly at Robert, a little half-smile just barely showing. Robert quickly retreats, slamming the door as it dissolves in a puff of thin smoke.

It is growing increasingly uncomfortable. Anxious. It must get out of here, whatever this is.

A dream. A nightmare.

Limbo? Had It been killed while slumbering?

Robert's head darts around as he searches the area, strange clanking sounds and echos vibrate in the distance coupled with a growing forest of giggling children's voices and the baaing of sheep.

'When will that be? Say the bells of Stepney. I do not know, says the great bell at Bow.'

Mike Hanlon comes forth, holding up a photo album. Opening it, there are various photographs of black birds.

"We're all afraid of something-even you." he says as the birds come to life and begin to flap their wings and squawk, emerging from the album's pages in droves, growing larger in size as they fly at Robert, pecking at him, their beady eyes glowing yellow. He ducks down and swats at them, growling as Mike fades into the dark.

As the birds swoop away, another familiar male voice appears.

"What's up clown man!" Richie Tozier jumps out, bat in hands as Robert, startled, stumbles backwards.

Ugh, of all the Losers, It had hated this one the most. The insulting little shit.

Richie continues to swing the bat, the wood making audible swooshing sounds that cut through the air.

Roaring, Robert grabs at the weapon, only to have his hands pass through it, tumbling forward as Richie cackles.

"Hey, no! Sorry no cigar! You know this place is worse than that crack house." he says, as he pauses to adjust his glasses.

Another final voice, immediately recognizable.

"He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts, he thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts."

Bill Denbrough steps forth from the tenebrosity, the boat pinched between his fingers.

"You're not real. None of you are. Old age took you back to the weeds long ago." Robert says glaring at him, his one iris starting to spark as Bill approaches.

Save for Mike. All are gone.

Bill smirks. "We're not real enough for you?" he replies, chuckling as an inhaler rolls out beside his feet. Eddie Kaspbrak reaches down to pluck it up, standing alongside Bill.

Raising it to his lips, he halts. "I actually don't need this anymore." Eddie says as he chucks it casually over his shoulder.

Richie moves to stand by them along with Mike and Beverly, with Georgie close behind, followed by Ben Hanscom, who holds up a piece of a large eggshell, black and shiny. Robert's expression drops at the sight, an angry grimace exposing his razor incisors.

Stanley Uris suddenly joins them, that same barely-smile still there. Almost mocking.

Robert glances around at his former adversaries.

"You should have stayed out of it. All of you, had you just kept to your business, let me have what I wanted, Stan and Eds would have lived longer, happier lives. I would have been nothing more than fragments of a forgotten dream. Amnesia is a kindness."

"We forgot, but you haven't forgotten us," Mike offers. "Have you?"

"We're still here," Bill adds, tapping the tip of the paper boat against his temple. "Can't escape that."

The eight are now bordering around him, with more emerging from behind: Candice Swain, Veronica Dell, the drunk Samuel, Colin and Hank Dobson, Esther, Noah Brady, the Muncy family, Julie, the hateful redhead Heather Taggart, Brandon Wilkes, Emily and her mother and the rest of the newest souls he'd claimed on this planet as well as his victims from Derry; the boys from the tunnel, Derek Stuart and James, Henry Bowers, Patrick Hockstetter decked out in his cartoon cat shirt, features chewed, the other two punks from the Bower's gang whose names he couldn't be bothered to remember, their necks bloodied, ripped open. Betty Ripsom, little Victoria, Adrian Mellon and the faces of endless Derry children and adults, some recognizable, some barely a hint of familiarity, many just a

passing blip on his existence like pretty Martha and naive Alison. Many he'd used and killed like Tom Rogan, some that survived his Deadlights like Audra Denbrough.

As well as the unfortunate wife of the true Robert Gray, Agnes and their daughter Emma. Scowling and hateful.

Decades upon decades of victims. Many missing limbs, their eyeballs gouged out, blood bubbling from their mouths.

"Why'd you kill me?"

"You ripped my legs off and left my body in a ditch."

"You ate my baby. My only son."

"My father died from a broken heart after I went missing."

"They only found my head with no eyes."

Whispering, talking, with some laughing menacingly, all tinted in dull green-blue as the numbers begin to grow as more appear behind them.

Then a few clear a path, allowing another achingly familiar figure to step into the bleak light.

Mirasal.

She moves to stand before him, bringing her arms up to scissor them across her chest, she gives him a somber scowl.

Robert lowers himself to his knees, keeping his gaze locked with hers as resentment and hatred glimmer within her cerulean disks.

"What was that you told me? That I could trust you?" she says, giving a repulsed head shake.

No. This is not her. Remember that. None of this is real.

Just a dream. It's not real.

Robert hangs his head in his hands. "I don't want to hurt you." he

mutters into his palms, his face shooting up at the sound of her chuckling derisively.

"Like I would believe you, you even thought about killing me," she replies. "Or perhaps give me a little *scare*."

With that, she leaps forward, her mouth unhinging, the blue eyes switching to ebony as she comes at him with her claws out. Robert winces back, covering his face, ducking his head down, only to feel nothing. He gingerly peeks out from beneath his fingers.

She's vanished. But the others, their irises blacking out to mimic that same appearance, still remain. All begin to draw closer, the Loser's Club at the forefront, their hands growing paler, some stained with blood splatter, grabbing at him as they close in, swaying back and forth, becoming more zombie-like.

"Get away from me," Robert rapidly stands, whirling around, panic gripping him as he growls, his one intact pupil now burning bright. "*Get away.*"

"We all float down here, Robert. Float with us. Float with us. " they all cantillate in unison. "Float with us."

"No, *no*. Leave me alone." Robert drops back down to the ground, cowering, shielding himself from their increasingly grotesque faces, their features shriveling up and dropping to the ground. Their cackles resounding through his skull, magnified.

"You'll float too! You'll float too! You'll float too!"

"No!" Robert shouts, covering his ears as the area begins to spin, the faces around him now blending together. "No! No! No! Please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Their laughing abruptly ceases, their fingers no longer grabbing and prodding at him, and all is quiet save for the angelic crooning beginning to rise again;

'Here comes a candle to light you to bed.'

Robert follows the source, coming into view of a tall lithe figure, its

slouching back facing him, standing in the center of a circle of light. The air above has red balloons hovering, completely still as Robert approaches, pausing every other step as the being becomes more visible, its ruffled off-white costume beginning to twitch as it turns to face him, bells jingling.

Robert stands facing his favorite form as it gives an empty grin.

What?

"Here comes a candle to light you to bed." Pennywise says as he reaches his elongated gloved fingers to grip the nape of Robert's neck. His eyes are two empty sockets, devoid of any color, his teeth yellowed needles as he brings his ghostly features closer, smooth, almost as if they were set in porcelain. Without warning he slams Robert to the ground, the strings of the balloons suspended above gently blow in response as he straddles him.

"Time to pay the piper, ol' Bob Gray," Pennywise intones as he lowers his teeth, only an inch from Robert's visage of both fear and confusion, the dripping saliva strings cold against his skin. Pennywise traces a bony finger along Robert's nose. "And here comes a chopper to chop off your head! Chip chop chip chop, the last man is dead!" he starts to maniacally cackle.

Squeezing his lids, Robert lets out a roar, fighting to free himself, thrashing beneath his double.

And just like that, the clown and the balloons are gone.

Robert peers up wide-eyed at his surroundings, now back to an unremarkable cave, the entrance now visible. Rising up shakily, he pauses when he sees Harold standing in a single crack of moonbeam coming in through a split in the grooves at the top of the cavern.

"Thought I'd take you on a little walk through memory lane." Harold announces, fighting back a snickering smirk.

Stumbling towards his brother, teeth bared, Robert sneers hatefully, "How dare you do that to me."

"You know, I did wrong by those children," Harold gazes off to the

side, a mien of moroseness drowning out his amusement. "As little Stan said, I failed them. Didn't help them enough."

"Not my fault you're lazy. 'Taking no stand' as you call it-I call it being useless. Only useful thing you did was puke up a universe, and that was a fucking accident."

Harold arches a brow. "You still look like shit, by the way. You've only been out a day. Slept through all the action."

Robert's evil glare drops. "What?"

"Just a situation in the hotel. Nothing I couldn't take care of. But don't worry, she's fine," Harold says in an enunciation that is almost sympathy. "Did you know there was another one running around here?"

Confused and shaken, Robert turns on his heel, giving his brother one final glower.

Leave him. It must go to her. Fuck it. Let her see. It will explain. Explain it all, only omitting certain unpleasant details. She'll understand. She's seen enough now. And It can give her everything. Everything she's ever wanted and dreamed of having. Only for a year, but that matters little. Maybe, maybe there is a way she can join It.

No, that's impossible. But It will make the most of their time. It was unsettled. Unsettled by what her mirage had told It, what she looked like. The anger and hate she exhibited towards It.

She doesn't hate It. That wasn't real. Just an illusion.

It must go to her.

"There's no point in going to her-" Harold cuts in.

"Fuck off."

"She's not going to know you."

Robert freezes in his steps, back still to Harold as he peers over his shoulder.

"She'll just see a stranger before her." Harold continues, no hint of mirth present.

Robert's visage has slipped into a mournful frown as he turns around, a quiet develops between them as he stares.

"What did you do?"

Harold shakes his head. "All of them. No one will remember a man called Robert Gray. Everyone you've encountered, everyone who's ever heard your name. You won't even be a fragment in their minds."

No.

"You son of a bitch." Robert growls through his clenched jagged teeth, chest starting to heave, his one eye full ruby red as he balls his fists, talons pricking the skin of his palm. Faint droplets of blood trickle upwards from between his fingers.

"Amnesia is a kindness, as you say," Harold says firmly. "You were just faking it with her anyway."

"No!" Robert's roaring yell is accompanied by a powerful gust of wind, knocking Harold back against the rocks. He quickly stands, his own irises now aflame like freshly kindled wood in a furnace.

"Me poisoning her thoughts! What about the way you poisoned me?!" Harold shouts as he unleashes his own forceful breeze at his brother, charging at him, he pounces and pins Robert down. "With your evil and your filth and negativity! I didn't just *choke* did I brother!" he pauses his attack to grip Robert's lapels. "What did I do?! I freed her from a parasite!" he yells as his right fist begins to thrash Robert's face. "That lazy stupid fucking Turtle, huh?!"

Harold's head then morphs into that of a turtle, then back to a man, then a turtle.

Staggering up, Harold grips his skull, shaking it, the turtle now shifting back.

Robert leaps up and knocks Harold back with a burst of orange energy emitting from his hands, slamming him into a pile of rocks as

a massive fissure begins to break apart the bottom of the damp cave ground, cutting all the way to the entrance, strips of glaring white light cutting through the gap, spraying the cave walls in brilliance.

Harold stands, holding out his palms as an electric green-blue energy begins to take shape, like bolts of lightning, its arms reaching for Robert as he mimics that same movement, the orange-yellow sparks coming up to collide with the fiery turquoise.

The cave ground continues to shred apart, exposing the white light further, its pillars starting to reach skywards. Cracks travel up the sides of the cave as the earth beneath them starts to violently shift.

"They should arrive soon, so don't touch anything-wait, what the fuck is that?" Tomah limps to the window overlooking the grotto, he motions towards the outside. "You hear that?"

Kikara crosses the room to stand by him. "Yes, I do. What is it?" she replies, pointing at the flickering shards poking out of the trees obscuring the cave entrance.

They're both knocked to the ground as a rolling shudder shakes the hotel.

A whirlpool of orange and blue-green static is forming mid-air between the two ancient beings, with each almost overpowering the other.

"You *worthless*..." Robert sneers, his intonation smeared with bile. Harold gives his own snarl of hatred.

"You were never my equal. Ever! Sitting in that sewer, pretending you were some kind of God. *It was pathetic!*" he spits.

They both falter backwards as the energy vortex suddenly ruptures, firing offshoots of electricity, striking at the cavern roof, shattering them and exposing the night air above.

Harold, summoning a psychic force field, raises a cluster of boulders and sends them hurtling towards Robert, who leaps out of the way.

The rocks slam against the cave barriers and break apart.

Stones and pebbles rain down on them as a final tear in the ground happens, freeing an enormous energy beam that shoots through the exposed cave roof. Harold begins to levitate, keeping his gaze pointedly on his brother, who follows, floating higher up, both staring each other down as they rise through the freshly created hole.

Below in Galivo, the oblivious festival-goers all gasp and point at the sight of the beam manifesting with a blinding flash of irradiant luminescence high above the city, slicing through the clouds. Illuminating the festivities and the faces of the attendees, displaying both fear and awe.

Saumo, standing with Arita amid the crowd, a gravelly whisper leaves his lips as he eyes the column of light as the clouds swirl in a quasar-like vortex.

"Demon."

The heavy boulders and stones of the cave continue to break free and drift in the direction of the beam's energy field, upwards through the night sky.

Mirasal runs through the lobby, passing by Ellowyn's corpse, still laying on the heap of lifeless robots. The authorities and her grandmother had been contacted and were expected to arrive and everyone was advised not to touch any of the bodies-or what was left. It would probably be another half-hour before anyone shows.

But it seems they made be arriving too late.

She heads towards the dining hall, almost slipping on pools of blood, as the room is overflowing with the mysterious light seeping in through the windows.

"What is that?!" she shouts at Kikara above the crashing sound of large stones breaking apart and colliding.

"I don't know!" Kikara responds, shielding a small crying human boy under her arms, as only a small number of survivors take refuge

under tables.

"I want my mommy!" the boy cries as Kikara cups his cheek.

"It's a quake!" a short blonde stocky woman yells.

Mirasal runs to a table, motioning for Kikara to follow. She ducks down beside her with the child in her arms. Tomah, Teora and Radaha soon follow, climbing under the table, as the building begins to violently rumble.

A strange sound of metal being torn away reverberates above as the top floor of the hotel is torn off. The scant survivors taking refuge in their rooms fight to hold onto whatever they can as they are pulled upwards towards the sky, the beam's magnetic pull tearing them away, screaming and hollering as they are sucked out.

In the dining hall, the boy continues his cries as Kikara holds him tighter.

Hovering far above the landscape, Harold and Robert continue to travel towards the hemisphere, the glare from the surrounding beam highlighting their forms. Harold suddenly sends another psychic torrent thrashing at Robert, who blocks it with his own surge of energy.

In the void beyond the end of the Todash, It sees the Turtle appear, his plastron shooting off rainbows of jeweled lights, his ancient wrinkled countenance swathed in the reflection of Its orange crawling destructive core. Just beyond, there's a shimmer of a light, almost like an opening door, and another appears; the Bear, in a dust cloud of stars and nebulae.

Followed by the Lion, the Hare, the Rat, the Eagle, the Bat, the Dog, the Fish, the Elephant, the Wolf and the Horse. All surrounding Its gargantuan form. Spirits It had only heard about but never glimpsed as they had largely kept to their respective territories.

Until now.

Each mammoth figure opens their lids, their eyes burn with white fire, boring through Its being as they step out of the gas clouds obscuring them.

At that moment, It felt it again, that emotion that had opened the floodgates.

Fear. More intense than what It had experienced before.

"Farewell brother." Harold says as he spreads his arms out as he opens his mouth, revealing three balls of white luster, lighting up his pupils.

The Guardians all mimic this movement, their mouths opening simultaneously to release a beam, the Eagle and Bat stretching out their wings, the Lion roaring as their combined energy strikes the Deadlights, drowning out the hairy orange luminosity. More smaller gleams emanate from the center of this enormous crackling, sparkling force field, consuming it.

At this, the Deadlights erupt in combustion, releasing the souls trapped within, thousands upon thousands of them, like shooting stars, one by one, firing off in a magnificent dance of light.

Robert's body contorts violently as his eye sockets are colored a seething orange-yellow, his mouth agape to reveal that same fiery light. Streaks of orange glints shoot out of his torso, from his fingertips. Like molten lava, his entire being flares up and ignites, unleashing a nucleus of sparks, visible for miles, raining down from the stormy sky.

Inside the dining room, the force is enough to shatter the stained glass windows, thick shards of colored glass scatter across the tables as Mirasal holds her arms around Kikara, the boy in her arms still screaming. Everyone remains shielding their faces from the particles.

The spectators below stand, all gawking and pointing as the glowing orange dots pepper the murky sky.

Like a cloudburst of fireballs fluttering down, their embers dying out and dissipating, leaving only thin vapor trails behind.

Above in what remains of the upper part of the hotel, Mirasal's room is destroyed, her radio in pieces, the painting gone, the rose, now vanished amid the debris.

The love box, however, lay on a pile of clutter, still intact.

31. Chapter 30

Chapter 30

"I demolish my bridges behind me...then there is no choice but to move forward."

— Fridtjof Nansen

The sunlight was warming over what remains of the Hotel Terog. Just above the black clouds had vanished, making Tarros' distinctive red sky and majestic rings that circle the planet visible once more. Birds were cheerily singing overhead, a sharp contrast to the dreary sight of the wreckage splayed across the mountaintop. The storm that had been raging without mercy for a week had, overnight, cleared.

The upper floors and roof of the building were obliterated, torn away, leaving a massive gaping open hole. Ruined artworks, bodies and furniture were all thrown about, trickling down the main stairwell—what was left of it. Possessions; clothes and suitcases as well as other personal items were laying in heaps around the floor of the lobby and dangling from the destroyed parts of the balcony. The glass chandelier had crashed to the floor, the decorative crystals shattered, their twinkling shards catching the sunlight that shone through the cracked and broken lobby windows.

The soft murmurings of the Galivo authorities were filling the cold morning air as they stand scattered around, interviewing witnesses, gathering evidence, the remains of the bodies being collected and identified, the thick scent of blood strong and nauseating, the atmosphere one of puzzlement and chaos. Many of the authority figures were asking the same question aloud;

Just what *had* happened here?

Mirasal sat out front on the small set of stairs that led into the lobby entrance, distraught, shaken and most of all, confused. As if she'd just woken up from a heavy slumber. She felt as if she'd missed the entire week. Everything just seems hazy, like she was sleepwalking. The events of last night has left her gobsmacked. Disoriented.

"You can't tell me what happened?" Sensza queries, touching her palm to her forehead and glancing around the damaged lobby, minimal compared to the upstairs area. She kicks aside a piece of a broken wooden chair as she steps out into the daylight to stand before her granddaughter, shadowing her sea green eyes with her hand as she observes the damage spread around them, the pink scarf draped along her neck and shoulders blowing as the mountain wind takes a brief uptick before dying down again.

"I don't know what happened," Mirasal replies, hands holding her arms, rocking slightly. "I don't know. There was this strange beam and a quake and then everything just happened very quickly, but I honestly don't remember much."

Strange indeed.

Her grandmother had shown, looking utterly shocked and devastated. The quivering panic in Sensza's voice as she immediately ran to Mirasal and embraced her eventually switched from relief to humor as she held her. "I know you don't like hugs, but I need to."

"It's fine," Mirasal smiled weakly as she patted Sensza's back. "I think it's appropriate for the moment."

They'd spent the remainder of the night going over the events, starting with the robot frenzy, but even that was a little fuzzy. Mirasal runs her metal palm along her cheek, shaking her head. "I don't recall any one thing in particular."

"It's alright, it's alright. I'm just relieved you weren't harmed," Sensza lowers herself to sit by her granddaughter. "You and the others are safe and that's what's important."

Just inside, Tomah is conversing with an officer. "We all saw it, this beam," he says, gesturing upwards as he speaks. "Right out there." He points towards the missing rooftop, a small breeze wafted in, blowing a few random pages of a book laying open on its spine upon the floor.

Kikara stood nearby, hands holding the young boy's trembling shoulders as he is questioned about the events, both in regards to the mysterious beam of light and the incident with the androids, all of

whom still remain piled in the lobby, covered with scraps of debris. The boy's hand had been bandaged up after being sliced open by flying splinters of glass.

"That's enough," Kikara says. "He's been through enough already. He doesn't need anymore of this. " The child's parents were no doubt dead, and he most likely was witness to their deaths, he didn't need any pestering questions to further his trauma.

Radaha and Teora were being grilled, with Radaha trying to explain about the rampaging droids and Teora standing silent, scouring the area.

"There may have been something else..." she offers, eyes narrowing as she nibbles her bottom lip nervously in rumination.

A woman. A gray-haired woman. But what had been her name again?

The Captain, adjusting her red cap shakes her head. "None of you saw anything beyond that?"

"No," Radaha exchanges a fleeting confused countenance with Teora. "Just that. That's it."

A tall, lanky, older human male standing nearby shouts, "It was like the goddamn Rapture!" He motions up towards the sky.

"I suggest all of you head home. Get some rest," the Captain announces as she eyes the man, gesturing at the exit. "That's all we have for you for now, but we'll be in touch. And, him-" she nods at the boy, still huddled by Kikara. "He'll have to go into custody. Until we locate a place for him."

"No-" Kikara argues.

"He has to. Nowhere else for him to go. What's your name boy?" The Captain squats by him.

"Jonathan Torrance." he snuffles, wiping his reddened nose with his knuckles.

"I can take him home with me-" Kikara begins.

"I'm afraid that is not going to be possible. Come with me Jonathan." The Captain reaches out to cautiously lead him outside, brushing past Mirasal and Sensza.

"Let's just get out of here. Get you home. Galiago has already brought the girls back there. He was incredibly worried." Sensza announces as she and Mirasal stand, heading in the direction of the lifts.

Tomah, Teora and Radaha soon followed, with Kikara reluctantly moments later. Just behind them is Melissa, who'd taken refuge in a closet just beyond the stairs and knew better to emerge until the coast was clear.

Her mind is cloudy, dazed as she leisurely heads to the exit, attempting to walk minus one high heel, nearly tripping over some scattered wood pieces, having also been questioned and tended to by the authorities.

Along the pathway, Mirasal smiles weakly. "I really want to see the girls." she says as she suddenly feels something in her pocket as she and Sensza board the lift.

A small turtle carving.

"What's that?" Sensza inquires, settling next to her on the seat.

Staring blankly at it a moment, Mirasal places it back in her pocket, with another smile at her grandmother.

"Just something I made." she says, giving a half-shrug.

Back in the hotel ruins, a group of policemen begin to unearth the robot scraps from under the heap of debris.

Underneath, Ellowyn's body is nowhere to be found.

Back in her home in Lavan, south of Galivo, Mirasal quietly sits in front of her fireplace, listening to the sounds of her daughters bantering back and forth just outside on the porch, the front door open, allowing the sun rays to brighten the living room. Sarez seemed oddly calm and less rambunctious, Ineti less morose. Her

grandparents had been reluctant to leave her alone, but she had assured them she was fine. The authorities were still in contact. They'd delivered Imarito's metals after discovering them in the rubble. The wooden box destroyed, but the metals themselves intact. Galiago had given her the new case he'd made for them and now they were tucked away safely in her closet. The authorities, however, were still asking, still prodding. Questions she had no answer to. It had been a few days of resting and she was glad to just be home and sleeping in her own bed again. Her time off was going to be over soon, and she wanted to enjoy it.

Just then, Ineti walks up to her, holding out a large piece of paper.

"I made this for you." the girl beams, showing off a drawing of a vibrant green turtle with multicolored streaks coming from his shell. Mirasal smiles wide as she takes it.

"Where did you get the idea for this?" she queries as she traces a metal finger along the messy black outlines along the plastron. "Looks like ahauvo taught you well."

Ineti does a little contemplative pout as she brings her fingers up to tap her chin. "Um, it was a dream. I saw it in a dream," she finally says, her brows knitting together. "Sarez says she had a dream about it too." She looks to where her younger sister sits, head down, humming to herself as she sketches, her hand rapidly passing along the paper.

Mirasal stares at the picture a moment before rising up and carefully placing it atop the mantle alongside Imarito's ashes and the tiny carving of the turtle.

Both girls had read about Earth animals, which could have inspired their shared dream. "Look at that," she says, pointing at the trinket. "We both thought of the same thing."

"Hmm," Ineti makes that same thoughtful expression. "He was bigger in my dream. He had these-" she points at the colorful streaks. "Coming out his shell. I was in this field and he was whispering to me. He was telling me that everything will be alright," she suddenly gazes down, twiddling her fingers. "Because of what happened to

fasare. He said we'll be alright."

Mirasal turns and looks down at her. "Really?" she kneels down and pulls Ineti into a gentle hug. "Yes, yes we will be."

That night, when it's late and the icy darkness is dominating the modest home, Mirasal jolts awake, hearing an engine roar in the distance.

And then, not long after, a soft knocking.

Mirasal tosses aside the bed covers and silently puts on a robe, making her way to the front door, without nary a thought of who it could be at this hour.

She knew.

Opening the door, she's immediately greeted with the light from Nehautor's cybernetic right eye, setting his weary features aglow. The metal armor adorning his upper arms also had a red illuminated outline along the design of a thyacoma skull. His long gray-white mane was neatly pulled back from his face, displaying the vertical black stripes down his forehead.

Mirasal steps outside, the chilly night air forcing her to tug her robe tighter against her body. "So," she begins. "You heard?"

"Yes, Naseret mentioned it." he replies as he places a small basket in front of her.

"When did you see her?"

"Just the other night. She mentioned she wasn't feeling too well. I wanted to see how you are."

"I'm fine. You didn't need to come." Mirasal stares off past his broad shoulder at the enormous ship hovering above the large field just outside the house.

"I know," Nehautor says as he reaches a hand out to cup her face. "I can't really stay too long. But I wanted to just look in on you and the

girls. This is for you." He gazes down at the basket, filled with the usual items; food and toys for her daughters.

"They're asleep. But they're doing well. They didn't see anything, they weren't there," she pauses a moment before she continues. "Have you talked to Masare?"

Nehautor gives a chuckle that's a cross between amused and lamenting. "No, no not at all. She-

"I know," Mirasal interrupts. "I know. I should have guessed." Silly question, really. Her mother had been complaining about feeling groggy, she most likely wouldn't be in the mood for any possible contact he tried. She'd mentioned Aradea was feeling under the weather as well.

"Well, I have to get going here," he glances back at the ship, starting to rev up, the yellow triangular lights along the bottom rapidly starting a rhythmic flashing. He gives her a brief, melancholic smile before heading off.

She watches the ship as it takes off, vanishing beyond a mountain along the darkened horizon, before she returns to her bed, the basket in her hands.

The next morning, Ineti is at the foot of her bed, her large expressive eyes gazing down at her mother as she stirs awake.

"I think we should, now." Ineti says as Sarez joins her by her side, giving a nod of agreement.

Mirasal, sitting up on her elbows, observes them for a beat. "If you want."

After having breakfast, they make a small hike to a large elegant corra tree, just at the edge of a nearby wooded area half a mile from their home. In Mirasal's arms is the gold and black urn with Imarito's ashes. The spot had been his favorite and he'd said he wanted to be there someday if he were to pass before her.

Along the arms of the tree were the stunning corra flowers blossoming thick from the branches, their ruby petals moist with the

glistening morning dew. A tiny white bird hops along a thin branch above, a large worm clamped in her beak, taking no notice of the visitors as she feeds her young chirping in a nearby nest.

Mirasal and her daughters had simply not been ready before to take the final step of scattering his ashes, but in the last few days, there had been a peace in the house, a resolution of sorts, and all three were at ease with letting him go. After so many moments where they felt they could move on, but weren't fully ready to. Usually, these little pockets of closure would appear, only to become depleted after a short time. But now, it seems they could let him go. Completely and without hesitation. Finally.

"It's like Dhesda, the tree." Sarez observes as she gazes up at the flowers, petals softly fluttering to the ground around their feet.

"That it is." Mirasal replies, removing the lid of the urn.

Each takes a turn sprinkling a small portion along the grassy base of the trunk of the tree. Afterwards, they stand and watch as the suns rise higher up into the sky. In the far off distance, beyond the mountainside is the Terog, black against the painted pastels of the morning air.

A few weeks later, the mysterious incident has been all but forgotten, by both those involved and the residents of Galivo and beyond. After the bodies had been taken out and any shred of evidence fully gathered, the half-destroyed building was demolished, leaving only bits of rubble.

32. Chapter 31

Chapter 31

"My sun sets to rise again."

— Robert Browning

Darkness.

Endless.

It is dead.

Just consciousness. Its final form destroyed. How much of time has passed by, It knows not.

Perhaps this is limbo. Or an afterlife. It has never considered the idea, as the concept of Its mortality was nothing It had previously thought of until recent times.

Floating. Floating through this vastness. Sorrowful thoughts drifting to her. It sees, in a steamy cloud of fog, the grotto. She is submerged with but her head and shoulders showing, her back to It. She turns, smiling vividly, before lowering her head underwater. The mist gradually blankets over as the image fades.

A voice, tranquil and silky deep, emanates from the blackness. A whispering. Far off, getting closer.

A can-callah maybe. But there are none here at the edge of the void.

"I am no can-callah, chard-dah...Deadlights." The voice is near. Close to It.

Who are you?

"I am he. The one whose presence so troubles you. The puppeteer you have lashed out at and condemned."

You created, then you had me destroyed. Why?

"A being whose purpose is solely consumption. Not intentional. I breathed life into many shapeshifters from Todash, you were one of them. You simply slipped through the cracks."

I was a mistake?

"In a word."

You are no God.

"You deny me World-Eater?"

A God that makes mistakes...

"Without mistakes, neither you nor I would be here. We learn from making errors. No being in any universe is immune to that, not even I."

You sent them after me, those children.

"The will of ka, my will..."

What purpose did I have? I would consume, sleep and dream and think of nothing more.

"You resisted any change. Evolution only comes when one is willing to break one's chains."

And what change could possibly have come? You showed me no other option. If your will is so strong...

"The only way change manifests is if one is willing to learn. The Derry katet taught you that you are not invulnerable. That you are capable of change, but alas, you resisted."

I cannot resist my nature. Survival. You gave me no other option.

"As of late, the thought of doing more has occurred to you. Your mind stretching, extending outwards. You showed potential. I have been attempting to show you other options. I'm hardly alone in doing so. Your brother-"

He did nothing but interfere when it was against his nature to do so.

"Ah, but you see, evolving. Change. He handled it well. He discovered another path. I have guided you..."

How? You have shown me nothing.

"I did. I have. It was she. "

...

...Her.

"All I can do is cast a stone along the water and create ripples. One of them was she."

Show yourself to me, Other.

A fluttering image of incredibly tall slender trees starts to appear within the void, like skyscrapers reaching upwards, where their tops can't even be glimpsed, blotting out the bottomless emptiness. Before It knows it, It is transported, standing in the center of a lush emerald forest, once again in the avatar of Robert Gray. A red-orange sunset sits just beyond the tree trunks, the sweet smell of dampened earth and fallen leaves lingers in the air.

The grass under his shoes is peppered with small pale pink flowers peeking up at him, their golden centers like irises watching him closely. A lovely sight indeed, like that of a dream. The rushing sounds of a stream nearby is tenuous as a gray and black striped fawn drinks from the clear blue water as it cuts through stones that sit along the bank, each of varying sizes and color; crimson, yellow, orange, pink, brown, dark blue, dark green, indigo, lime, azure, violet, pearl gray, and black.

The fawn, ears perked, looks up and dashes away as the voice appears again, this time right behind Robert.

"Chard-dah."

A dirt path begins to take shape along the grass blades, leading to a serene clearing. Robert begins to follow it and at the end, he sees a figure in dark clothing. A man who towers a good four feet over him, A Rasputin-looking, somewhat intimidating one. Bald atop his oddly

angular head with a pony tail holding the tuft of long sleek ebony hair that begins above his ears and beneath the lower half of his skull. A goatee of equal length dangles from his chin. The hair tendrils move on their own, twisting, curling, as if alive.

Most unsettling, however, is a smooth layer of skin, slightly wrinkled, where eyes should be, making any detection of expression and emotion impossible.

"You fear me." the faceless man says, his voice hollow, toneless as Robert draws closer. The tall man's lengthy black robes and silk red cape are flowing out from behind him, despite the absence of any wind.

"Fear is the only thing I can feel now." Robert replies, almost meekly, tucking his chin down.

"You need not fear me, my son. I am like a spider with no venom. At least that's what Bessa says."

"Why do you come to me? Why now?"

"You are ready. Before, you were not. Your hostility would have made any interaction somewhat unpleasant."

"You say I slipped through the cracks..."

"When the Prim receded, many of my creations simply died or learned to adapt. But you, you slipped into the Todash, and eventually made your way to Earth," the man replies as he thoughtfully twiddles the tip of his goatee between rawboned fingers that narrow at the blunt fingertips. "Survival indeed. You hibernated, then you arose from the bowels of the Earth to consume. Then you'd sleep, and the cycle would repeat again."

"Before I simply thought I was alone. Just myself and the Turtle."

"But you knew. Deep down inside you sensed my presence. Felt it. Your arrogance was deluding you."

"Perhaps." Robert's lip twitches in response to the man's statement, and he takes in a sharp inhale through his nostrils.

"But the Derry ka-tet, they were a learning experience. Their resilience proved to be useful. You at least were able to comprehend-"

"I am not eternal," Robert concludes flatly. "You've shown me no mercy. Either to me or towards my young."

"As you haven't towards any who crossed your path. We are not different in that regard," the man retorts, sly smile upon his eerie visage as he raises his massive palms out. "The hands of ka, these hands, are anything but merciful."

"You say she was a ripple..."

"I placed her in your view. But I did nothing more. You simply did the rest on your own. Your capabilities expanded. You resisted less. You showed me there is a different light inside of you. Flickering within, just a tiny flame sitting among your destruction. But it was there. You were able to see differently, more openly. Experience things you certainly weren't able to see before in your eons of stubborn existence, World-Eater. You had purpose."

Robert looks away, gaze landing on the stream, which appears as if it has grown in size. He looks up at the man, somber. "And what now?" he asks softly, humbly.

Too late now. No rest.

Thoughts are of her once again, and a blossom of pain comes on, shivering through Its body like bee stings. Rippling through whatever this current form is. Not a physical one. Not permanent.

A ghost, maybe.

As a sheet of delicate rain begins to touch down upon them, the tall man stays uncomfortably silent as the fawn appears at the hem of his black robes. He reaches down and scoops up the creature, remaining mute, his flowing cape begins to encircle his willowy form, like bat wings, closing in on him as he dissipates into the air in a poof of black smoke.

"Where...?" Robert mutters as he remains staring down at where the man had been, the rainfall is now growing more violent every

second, crackling down upon the surface of the river, now flooding even more, spilling out the sides of the bank, breaking the colorful stones loose from their place in the slippery mire as a titanic wave comes crashing through the trees, bending them with its fury.

"Hey! Where are you?!" Robert shouts as he attempts to flee, climbing up a dampened tree halfway, grasping at its arms, his soles slipping down along the water-slicked slabs of bark, trying to keep his grip.

"Shit!"

His fingers are yanked from the branches as they snap under the pressure and he's violently swept away, roughly pushed underwater. Deeper and deeper. He stays, eyes shut, suspended, sinking farther into the depths, the entire wooded area now submerged.

Images start to flash by; Mirasal, smiling at It, laughing, touching Its face with tenderness. Gazing up at It with affection. The vistas of memories play out; them at the piano, sitting in the patio conversing, the trip to her mother's, the play, the festival, the lanterns. As It continues to descend, bubbles escaping through Its lips.

Past the shimmering surface of the underwater landscape, the Other's voice comes.

"Deadlight."

"Lifelight."

A beam of light cuts through the water, like an enormous floodlight being switched on above, illuminating Robert's body as he opens his lids and stares up at it, the white funnel of light swarming over him as he is pulled upwards in the direction of the surface with increasing speed. Flashes of flares cutting across his pathway like strips of lightning.

Breaking the surface, coughing, gagging, choking up the water that has accumulated in his lungs, Robert Gray opens his eyes, the sockets pink and stinging as he gazes around his environment; a river, with a thin coat of mist crawling over.

A Thycenian man, enjoying fishing at dawn upon his small wooden

canoe, is startled and screams, rapidly paddling his boat in the opposite direction of the unexpected, unpleasant surprise shattering his serene morning as the stranger emerges from the Terog river.

Shivering, and naked, Robert shakily climbs out and onto a cluster of chilly boulders, holding his upper arms tightly as he trembles, water drips beading along his pale flesh.

He gradually crawls towards a short thick tree, curling up in a fetal position under its low-hanging branches.

The fisherman, having docked and realized the odd trembling naked man posed no threat, charily approaches him as the birds begin their morning songs.

Two years. It had been two years since the horror at the Terog. Melissa has long retreated back to New Jersey, having cleaned herself up, meeting a nice young man who owns a chain of laundromats. A child was born the following year.

The hotel's former employees have since found new careers with Tomah returning to the military, vowing to never work in the hotel industry again. Radaha the cook found gainful employment with a small seaside cafe in Dulaman. Having grown the number of dishes she could make, the owners were happy to have her. Teora opted for a cozy job in Saumo's antique shop. The place, he'd told her, needing cleaning.

However, she kept in Galivo, as something interesting was happening upon the mountain where the once-glorious Hotel Terog had stood. Just as she was heading to work every morning, she could see it; a new hotel being built. The foundation just starting to be laid and the wood and cement being brought up from the city. Glimpsing the framework being erected, with more progress every month.

It had only started with faint whispers. The construction had begun only a year ago and was now nearing completion. It was not as large as the old building, but more modest with fewer rooms. The owner had made sure to create the original hotel's vision; an artist retreat rather than tourist trap.

They'd christened it the Hotel Gama, after the native Tarrosian flowers that bloomed during the most violent storms. The grotto was still present, but the cave was now collapsed, burying whatever secrets that lay within.

The Weeping Tree stood, reigning over the area.

Upon the final piece of furniture being placed in and artworks from the most famed artists placed upon the walls, the doors were opened to the public, Teora contacted Mirasal, urging her to come and visit. A perfect place to vacation.

"Kikara and John are doing well." Teora announces as they sit in Miirasal's room after her arrival. Kikara had fought for custody of little Jonathan Torrance, and was granted legal guardianship six months earlier. She and her family welcomed the boy and they'd relocated to a farm in rural Ruanor.

"That's good. I'm happy she's doing well." Mirasal smiles, somewhat sadly. They didn't really talk as much nowadays, but an occasional letter would happen. But not much else. She quietly snaps on her new radio-another vintage item she'd discovered-as they head out to the balcony just outside the room to enjoy the imminent sunset.

'My love must be a kind of blind love, I can't see anyone but you, are the stars out tonight, I don't know if it's cloudy or bright, I only have eyes for you dear.'

As Ineti and Sarez, recently back from a long-overdue visit with Imarito's family, quietly sit and draw just beside them, Teora gives Mirasal a gentle nudge in her side, leaning in to whisper in her ear so as not to allow Ineti and Sarez to hear the gossip that was circling around among the locals.

"The hotel's owner? I heard a fisherman found him running around naked by the river. Can you believe that? The fisherman said he was completely nude."

Mirasal suppresses a giggle. "Probably too much Narculli." she whispers back.

"I know, but can you believe someone like that owns the place? Can you imagine the talk? People are wondering who he is and where he came from."

"Outworlder?"

"I think so, they said he looks human, but who knows," Teora then perks up, gazing at each of the two little girls. "Let's go get some food from the kitchen, shall we?"

"Yes!" both Ineti and Sarez chime in unison as they all head out the room's door and down the stairs. As they come to the lobby, Mirasal pauses before they reach the kitchen.

"You go ahead and get them something. I'll just be a minute."

Mirasal heads out the back way of the building, making her way down that familiar grassy hill, coming to a halt at the scenic view overlooking the river below. The landscape altered but still recognizable. She'd wanted to see it, soak up the childhood memories. It was strange now that her grandparents had sold the land and the buyer had subsequently sold it to the mysterious new owner.

She stares off at the triple suns, the sky is powder blue and pink layers, the fresh mountain air making her peaceful. She closes her eyes as the cool breeze brushes along her body.

"Hey, you're her."

"I am?" Mirasal turns around and is staring at an incredibly tall auburn-haired man with an inviting smile.

"Mirasal. Your grandparents owned the old building."

"Yes, I used to enjoy coming here." Mirasal replies, glancing back out over the horizon, the wind gently moving the newly-cut fringe she sported.

"You can still come here. Whenever you want. I'm Robert. Robert Gray." he says. "I believe you say 'buna diwas', right?"

"Yes, that is correct." Mirasal nods, visibly impressed.

"And, that-" he points downwards. "Is the Terog River."

"It means 'life.'" Mirasal replies.

"And gama means 'strong.' I got the hotel's name from that. Someone told me about the flowers once."

"You are very well-versed in our language, it seems."

"Yeah, but I, uh, need a little help. Just with learning certain things. I'd like it if you could teach me." he says, giving her a shy countenance.

"Well, I'm not a-"

Robert gives a wide smile. "Teacher? That's okay, I just need a little help with some things. Maybe show me around the city."

"I suppose I could give you some help." Mirasal says, smiling as Robert moves to stand by her to share the view.

Nearby, perched upon a small stone by the water, just behind them, is a turtle, watching. A small hint of a smile upon its beak. Its golden eyes shimmering in the dying sunlight.

33. Epilogue

Epilogue

"Ka is a wheel; its one purpose is to turn. The spin of ka always brings us back to the same place, to face and reface our mistakes and defeats until we can learn from them."

— Robin Furth

The air is cooling, the wind soft, cutting through blades of grass and tickling the tips of the petals of a rose garden that sits a few feet outside of a large one-story home in the countryside. It was that time of day when evening was drawing near and it was getting colder, but the sunlight was still present.

"We should go inside now, we've been out here all day. You'll be cold. And you're dirty." Robert says. Mina frowns up at him as she places her hands on her hips.

"Not yet, I'm not ready." she replies. Their time in the garden was special for the two of them, and she cherished every moment.

Besides, she knew going inside meant promptly being placed in the bath.

"You'll be cold." Robert repeats, kneeling, pushing piles of earth along the base of a newly-planted sapling, its thin branches weaving.

"No, I won't. I actually like the cold." she replies as her tiny hands continue to pile small clumps of dirt into little mounds. She pauses and grins, her azure eyes twinkling.

"You're like your mother. She doesn't mind it either." Robert gives her a gentle rub along her head.

A little monster sometimes.

Figurative, of course.

Mina remains silent, smiling as she continues her task of planting a

seed carefully in the ground, before she perks up, patting the moist soil in place.

"I want to hear the story again, about how they got to Tarros." she says as she points to the garden of roses with the pink, red and yellow petals and the pulsating centers. The burgeoning shadows being cast along them not diminishing their beauty.

"You've heard it enough, haven't you?" Robert smiles. "It never changes. It's always the same."

"I know, I know. But I want to hear it again. About the monster in the cave and the Thycenian woman. I mean, it gave her one of them right?" Mina pauses and stares, little fingers coming up to fleck a crumb of dirt from under her nose.

"Yes, but it was fake." Robert replies as he moves to sit, resting his arm on his bent knee.

"But why would he give her a fake one?" Mina queries, halting her movements to observe him again, those big round eyes anticipating, eyebrows knotted.

"Because the monster wasn't very nice. But he eventually gave her a real one. And from there an entire garden grew," Robert glances over to the roses, their centers flashing, almost in unison. "And that's how they got to this planet."

"And they fell in love and he wasn't a monster anymore," Mina finishes, happily patting the ground, sealing it. "I love that story."

A story. The real one not so clean-cut.

Yes, I was a monster, but no more. That seems like it was ages ago.

Deadlights destroyed. Only left with this modest form. The form of Robert Gray. Just a simple hotel owner.

A creature of consumption now a creator.

Robert looks at the little girl with wonderment, reaching his fingers over to move stray strands of hair blowing in her face that have

broken loose from her pigtails.

Love rather than hate.

"Now, let's get inside. Your mother and sisters are waiting. It's almost dinner time." Robert rises up, wiping his palms off on his trousers. He stands grinning down at her as he sticks his fingers out, wiggling them. She takes it, but not without a bit of adorable pouting.

Just like her father.

"Alright," she hangs her head, before lifting back up to beam up at him as she grips his hand. "But no bath."

Robert, giving her a stern look that's more playful than anything, reaches down to boop her nose, making her giggle. They turn to walk along the dirt pathway, stopping to stare off into the distance.

Seems far away. All of it.

Another time. Another world.

He glances down to smile at Mina before scooping her up and balancing her on his shoulders. She curves her arms around his neck, resting her temple against his scalp.

"No bath," she says, her voice muted against his shock of copper hair.

"Bath first," he counters as he walks past the garden to the front door, just as the sunset comes on, triggering the roses ghostly song, the voices being carried away in the light wind.